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THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1997
VOL. 282, NO. 6

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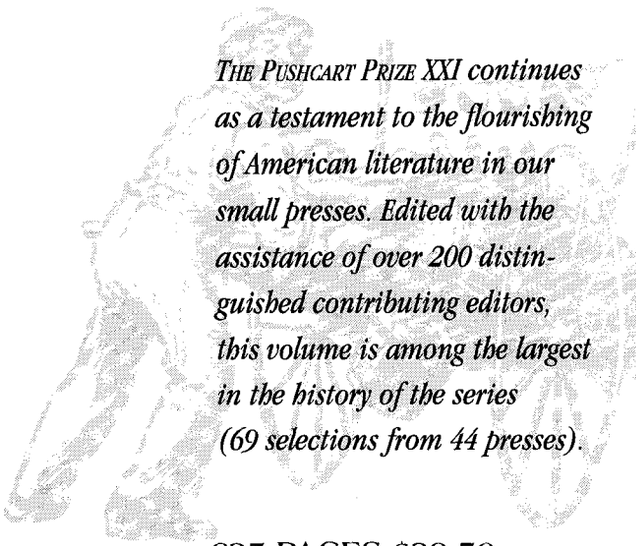

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Do please indulge us (even as we indulge ourselves) in a small disquisition on the so-called short-short story.

A few of our Constant Readers will recall that in the 1930s and '40s, a number of domestic magazines published fiction "complete on these pages"—usually a pair of facing pages. *Collier's, Liberty, American,* the original *Saturday Evening Post*—you veterans know the names—all of them in those halcyon days of the story often printed fiction whose length ran between a thousand and three thousand words. Since the gradual and unwarranted decline of interest in the short story (especially traceable to the bottom-line mindset of New York City publishing), a number of literary venues have been soliciting the "short-short." Usually the solicitation takes the form of a contest, complete with an entry fee and strict word-length requirements.

The stories thus invited carry a variety of names: "flash fiction," "sudden fiction," "microfiction," others surely to be announced. Once upon a time our own preference was for "quiction," but in fact we opted many years ago for "4-Minute Fictions"—a bow in the direction of Roger Bannister, who first broke that mile-run barrier (a barrier now regularly surpassed in the distance world of track and field).

The latest edition of the NAR's short-short stories—formerly known as 4-Minute Fictions—begin on page 23, and it must be noted that their length is unpredictable. *Story* magazine asks for "1500 words or less," the annual Sun Dog competition (a crate of oranges to the winner) wants a maximum of 250 words, other editors offer other counts.

The NAR is nothing if not laissez-faire. Two magazine pages, a thousand words, the back of an envelope—whatever. We believe form follows function, and a good short-short story will dictate its own length. Go to page 23; see what we mean; enjoy our laziness.

One small political note: Meg Greenfield, in a recent *Newsweek* column, remarked on the present condition of Federal governance. Is it possible, she asked, that our leaders really *don't know* what they're doing, what they've done? Is it possible that they really are *surprised* when confronted with their past actions? Are these elected gentlemen in fact only the zombies of our horror-movie adolescence? Good questions.

An omission: The silkscreened cover of the NAR's September/October number, by Kurt Vonnegut, was produced by his longtime colleague Joe Petro III.

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The Disenchantment of the World

ROBERT NEWTON

1. The Abyss

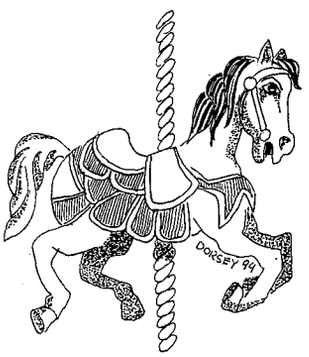
WHEN I ARRIVED for my religion class one day, my students had fallen into the Abyss. I heard their cries and groans as I came down the hall. I threw open the door and found them grieving on the floor, soaked in tears.

"What is this?" I said to them. "How did you fall into the Abyss?"

"You told us that the gods are gone," they said.

"Even in mythology," I admitted, "the gods are no longer here."

"You told us that the angels left us," my students said.



"Nobody," I was forced to say, "has seen an angel since Hermas, almost twenty centuries ago."

"You told us, Professor, that the world is disenchanted now."

"True, true," I said. "And since the disenchantment of the world, no one has seen so much as an elf in the woods."

"Then we are lost," my students said. "We are miners grown afraid of the ground, jewelers who have lost their faith in stones, moths with no porch light. We are alone, all alone, and the Abyss is dark and deep."

Then they began to suffer twice as loudly as before, and with such violence the building began to crumble around us.

I had to save them from the Abyss.

"PREPARE YOURSELVES FOR THE LUNAR LECTURE," I announced

My students gazed up at me, full of hope, and in the distance dogs began to howl.

2. Why Women Lay Eggs

THE TRAVELER PAUSANIAS (I said to my religion class, launching the Lunar Lecture) discovered one day an egg in a temple. The temple was in Sparta and the enormous egg was "hanging from the roof tied with ribbons." This, Pausanias said, was no doubt "the legendary egg which was laid by Leda."

Why would a woman lay an egg? Because Leda had been ravished by Zeus who, for that famous crime, assumed the form of a swan. Thus the union produced an egg and from that egg hatched Helen, the most beautiful of mortal women. Then Helen was abducted by Paris, which caused the Trojan war. And were it not enough that Leda was ravished and Helen abducted, the egg was hanging in a temple dedicated to Phoebe and Hilaeia, Helen's nieces, and Phoebe and Hilaeia were kidnapped by Castor and Pollux. Dogs, Pausanias added, were sacrificed at this temple, and no wonder.

Before the disenchantment of the world, when there were gods and demons, monsters and villains everywhere, dogs had their duty, and how could all these crimes have taken place, if dogs were vigilant?

Everybody knew, for that matter, that dogs were sacrificed at Rome because they failed to bark when the Gauls attacked, and a flock of conscientious geese had to raise the alarm and save the day. ("This," Aelian wrote, "is the reason why up to this present day dogs at Rome annually pay the penalty of death in memory of their ancient treachery, but on stated days a goose is honored by being borne along a litter in great state.")

But there was another theory about the enormous eggs, and this was a lunar theory.

"Women on the Moon lay eggs," Herodotus said. There were huge persons on the Moon, "fifteen times as large as we are," and Moon-women laid eggs. Because the Moon was a smooth and perfect sphere, one of those huge eggs might well slip off and fall to Earth. So Leda's egg had no doubt been laid on the Moon, then fell to Earth, and Sappho said that Leda found it under a hyacinth. No wonder then that Helen's beauty was unearthly.

But who could believe such a fanciful tale? Everyone knew that the Moon could not possibly be inhabited, since it was not a world. There was only one world, made for us. The Moon was simply one of the lights in the sky, a lamp the gods provided for our nights.

Then Socrates, on the day of his death, announced that he was going to the Moon.

3. Why Philosophers Dwell on the Moon

THE MOON, SOCRATES TOLD his followers as he prepared to drink the hemlock, was another world. In fact it was a better world than this one. And his soul, as soon as he had poisoned himself, would travel there.

For the Moon was inhabited by souls, but not just any old souls, because only those who have been preëminent for holiness of life are released from this earthly prison, and go to their pure home, which is

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above, and dwell in the purer earth.

The souls of philosophers dwelled on the Moon, and no wonder. The souls of philosophers were lofty and fine, but Earth was damp, unclean, foul, unfit for such souls. The Moon was better. Any place above this world must of necessity be better, since it was higher. Earth was the lowest place in the Universe.

Having revealed this much, Socrates called for the cup of hemlock, tossed it off, and died.

But then the question arose: If the Moon was another world, might it not have other, more substantial inhabitants? Might the Moon have inhabitants who were not invisible and ineffable? Was anyone there, not to put too fine a point upon it, besides used souls?

4. Why Those on the Moon Drink Dew

UNFORTUNATELY, there were five irrefutable arguments against the inhabitation of the Moon by any being more substantial than old souls:

First, the Stoics said the Moon was fiery. Light comes from fire; light came from the Moon; therefore, the Moon was fiery. No one could live in a fire.

Second, were the Moon not fiery it was still too hot, because it had no shade. The Moon was cloudless, as anyone could see, and therefore shadeless, and any person on the Moon would be baked to death by the Sun.

Third, since the Moon was cloudless, neither did it have rain. Without rain there was nothing to drink, and anyone on the Moon would die of thirst.

Fourth, in the absence of rain there were no crops on the Moon, so there was nothing to eat, and anyone on the Moon would starve to death.

Fifth, not only was the Moon fiery, hot, cloudless, shadeless, rainless, and foodless, it was also very smooth, and revolved. Therefore anyone standing on the Moon would instantly be flung off and fall to Earth and be killed.

Fortunately, Plutarch was able to refute these arguments.

The Moon was not fiery, he said, because it only borrowed its light from the Sun. Everybody knew, moreover, that the Moon produced dew—that was why there was more dew when the Moon was full. And if the Moon turns air into dew, surely it also "liquifies and cools" the heat of the Sun. Therefore the Moon was not hot. As for food, "it is plausible that the men on the moon, if they do exist, are slight of body and capable of being nourished by whatever comes their way." As for water, they could drink the dew. And the Moon's rotation is so "gentle and serene," surely "there is no danger of falling and slipping off for those who stand there."

But there was something far more important, Plutarch said, than all these little arguments.

Worlds were not made for nothing. A world had a purpose, a reason to exist, or why would the gods have made it? A world, no matter how wretched, was somebody's home. Therefore if the Moon was another world it must be "for men of some kind of origin, an abode, and a means of life," or the Universe was absurd.

But proof of this would have to wait another fifteen centuries, until Galileo turned a telescope toward the Moon.

5. Why Selenites Need Bibles

"I FEEL SURE," Galileo announced in 1610,

> that the surface of the Moon is not perfectly smooth, free from inequalities and exactly spherical, as a large school of philosophers considers with regard to the Moon and the other heavenly bodies, but that, on the contrary, it is full of hollows and protuberances, just like the surface of the Earth itself, which is varied everywhere by lofty mountains and deep valleys.

The Moon was another world! It was equipped with mountains and valleys, and why would Providence "furnish that place with all such conveniences of habitatation," John Wilkens asked, if not for its inhabitants?

All that remained was for huge telescopes to be built with which the Moon could be examined for the roads and buildings and cities that were surely there.

Eventually the astronomer Johannes Schroeter announced that he saw mists and vapors on the Moon. Apparently the Moon had an atmosphere.

Then an astronomer named Schmidt said he observed a patch in a lunar crater turning white. Apparently the Moon had seasons.

Dr. Olbers announced that the Moon's surface "is more or less covered with a vegetation not very dissimilar to that of our earth." There was food on the Moon.

Then Schroeter announced that the mists and vapors he had seen might in fact have been emitted by the smokestacks of lunar factories. Dr. Olbers declared the Moon's inhabitants rational. Another astronomer declared that no doubt "great edifices do exist on the

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moon." Dr. Thomas Dick calculated that if the Moon were "as densely peopled as England, it would contain a population amounting to four thousand two hundred millions, which is more than five times the population of the earth," and those on the Moon might be "far more elevated, in the scale of intellect, than the inhabitants of our globe."

A minister in New York told his congregation that it was time to consider "a subscription to buy Bibles for the benighted inhabitants of the moon," and give them light.

But then, suddenly, there was ghastly news. Franz von Grithuisen announced that, yes, he had seen "great artificial works in the moon erected by the Lunarians," and those works were no doubt "a system of fortifications thrown up by the selenitic engineers." The problem was that those structures were irregular, jagged, fallen. The structures on the Moon were ruins.

6. Why We Go On

THE MOON WAS in ruins. Surely all was lost, and there was no reason to go on.

Just a moment, two or three voices said. Was it not possible that survivors huddled in the ruins, guarding hope against despair? And if that were true, might it not be possible to contact those survivors, if we only had a plan?

The mathematician Karl Gauss announced a plan to plant pine trees in Siberia. We should plant pine trees in the shape of an enormous triangle, he said. Then plant other pine treens in the shape of squares on the sides of the triangle. Then, in twenty or thirty years, when the trees were big, any Lunarian who looked at Earth with a telescope would see at once that Earthlings understood the Pythagorean theorum, and were intelligent. In another thirty years, we would have an answer.

But what if those on the Moon had no telescope? The astronomer Joseph von Littrow announced another plan. We should dig, he said, an enormous ditch in the Sahara, twenty miles long. We should fill that ditch with kerosene. Then on some cloudless night we should set it ablaze and the Selenites would see our signal fire, telescopes or not.

Others suggested that a series of tremendous mirrors would work, or a sequence of gigantic explosions.

But who could be sure these plans would work?

Fortunately there was one other solution.

7. How We Rise Toward Heaven

ON SEPTEMBER 19TH, 1783, King Louis XVI stood on the lawn of his palace at Versailles. The Montgolfier brothers were completing their preparations. A great balloon made of linen and paper was filled with hot air from a fire, and then a cage was attached underneath the balloon. Then a sheep, a rooster and a duck were led across the lawn of Versailles.

These astronauts were placed in the cage beneath the balloon. The whole apparatus was checked, and rechecked. Then the Montgolfier brothers gave the order to untie the ropes and release the balloon.

As the king in his finery watched, the balloon with its pas-

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Author's note: The phrase "the disenchantment of the world" is taken from Max Weber, who took it from Frederick Schiller.

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sengers rose into the sky, into the clouds, ever higher. The sheep, rooster and duck gazed calmly toward the stars.

The Age of Space Travel had begun.

8. Lecture's End

"THUS DID CIVILIZATION rise to glory," I said to my religion class at lecture's end, "and thus did Earthlings step at last upon the surface of the Moon."

I had saved my class from the Abyss. My students looked up at me, full of gratitude, and dried their tears.

"Of course," I was forced to add, "the Moon was desolate."

Two or three of them moaned a little.

"We could not find so much as a one-legged flea up there, and all we have from Mars is some sort of festering bacteria, hiding in a rock."

My students held each other and wept.

"But this only meant one thing."

"What?" my students asked.

"It meant that if there were aliens, they had to come here. It meant there was only one proof that aliens existed: their arrival. So we watched the skies and, at last, they came."

"They did?"

"We are not alone," I said, "for according to a thousand reports, the aliens are here. They came in ships that were seen crossing the sky. They were seen hovering over cities and over deserts. How can the world be disenchanted, if we have so much company?"

"Wonderful news," my students said, drying themselves again.

"No," I told them, "it is not. According to the same reports, these aliens raise humans to their ships with tractor beams, strip them, strap them to tables, and probe them in the most unseemly ways."

"We are lost," my poor students said.

"You can hardly cross the desert," I added, "without being ravished by their cruel beams."

"What must we do to be saved?" my students begged.

"There is only one thing to do," I said. "We must sacrifice a dog." □

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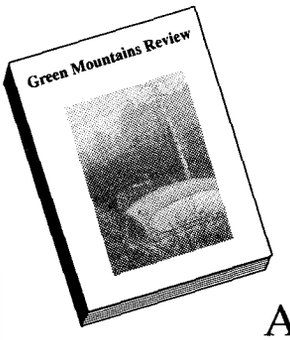

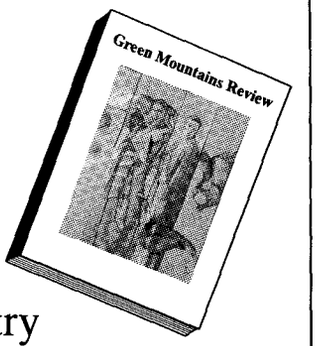

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Testing Freedom:
A Woman at the Wheel in Africa

PETER CHILSON

I SHOULD HAVE BEEN talking with Hajia Mariatou Moustapha. We had an appointment. Instead, I was watching her shoulder through a throng of angry men standing around a body on the ground outside the central market in the center of Niamey, the capital city of Niger, West Africa. She was shouting, *Laissez lui, laissez lui*—"leave him alone, leave him alone."

But four men, shorter and thinner than she—it took at least four—gripped her arms and shoulders to hustle Mariatou backward out of the crowd. She shuffled back with them, not struggling and somehow not startled, but shaking her head and saying something I could not hear. The men left her standing alone on the street, and returned to the crowd. She watched the mob carry the body of the man she sought, hoisted shoulder high on many hands, away to an unknown fate.

It mattered to no one, except Mariatou, that the so-called thief never had a chance to plead his case—that he may, in fact, have been innocent. He had, however, been caught *in situ*, on the edge of the open marketplace, opening the driver-side door of her car, a Peugeot 504 station wagon, brand new. Not hers, really, but her employer's, the United Nations Children's Fund. Hajia Mariatou is Niger's only licensed woman commercial driver, and possibly the only one in West Africa. And everyone, as she would be the first to tell you, knows her around this city.

Someone saw this "thief" and, having recognized whose car he was opening, the witness shouted — "*Voleur, Voleur*!"—a death sentence in a West African market where the crowds, the chatter, the odors and sounds of business and society run thick. Someone sent a boy to fetch Mariatou inside the market, where she operates a driving school from a one-room office. Mariatou teaches people how to drive, another first for a Nigerien woman. Her clients are mostly other women (she hired a man to handle the male clients) though she teaches the occasional man, usually a man wealthy enough to not care who knows a woman is telling him how to drive.

A taxi had dropped me off outside the market's high cement walls, in time to catch this woman wading into the mob around the accused, her head loosely bound in fashionable blue cloth, bobbing above the crowd. As I approached, I saw the four men carry her back. From the edge of the crowd, I saw the alleged thief lying under clubs, fists, feet. Ashen-faced. Blood pooled in the pit of the man's neck above his collar bone and poured from his nose and forehead. Pink foam caked his lips. His arm was broken, bent crazily backwards at the elbow.

For a couple of minutes, Mariatou observed this scene, the palm of her right hand over her mouth, before she turned, head bowed, and walked away. She carried a certain authority that allowed her to face down a crowd of men, and a certain common sense that told her not to struggle when the men carried her out. She was 37, five-feet and 10 inches tall, around 200 pounds, a size she cultivated. She walked gracefully and swiftly, elbows out, wearing a bright blue cotton wrap and a matching robe. On her right forearm six gold and silver bracelets clinked faintly when she swung her arms. I followed her back to the office, l'Ecole Conduite Mariatou, where I had hoped to interview her. The room, in a corner of the market's cement walls, was windowless and furnished with a wood table, two chairs, and a six-foot-high diagram of city streets and traffic symbols painted in blue, yellow, white and red on one wall. Mariatou sat, her face drawn, but she smiled weakly. She said, "I think you should come back in the morning."

"MEN CAN'T DO EVERYTHING," Hajia Mariatou told me when I first met her in early April 1993, three weeks before the theft attempt. We were in that Peugeot, driving across Niamey on UNICEF errands, the first of many rides I took with her around the city. "Teaching people to drive made me restless, so my husband said, 'Why don't you drive a city bus and teach them what a woman can do.'" This grant of independence struck me as out of the ordinary in a Muslim marriage, but Mariatou saw the situation simply. She gave me a look of surprised annoyance when I inquired about it. "He is a generous and good man," she said.

Today, four years later, Mariatou's words and ambitions worry me. I have lost touch with her. To preserve hope, I write under the assumption that she is fine. My letters go unanswered, a result, perhaps, of chaos that has followed the 1996 military coup that toppled Niger's only popularly elected government after three years in power. Civil servants are six months behind in pay and strikes are constant. Mail service goes down for days at a

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time. More pronounced, as well, are the words of Niger's Muslim high priests, the imams, whose brief taste of freedom under democracy has fed their religious fervor. They demand that the military support the rule of Muslim Shariah law, and that women cover themselves from head to toe as the Koran instructs and that they be denied formal education and jobs outside the home. The generals have resisted, but the imams have a stronger hold on hearts and minds—the power to motivate men to stone women in public for wearing improper clothing.

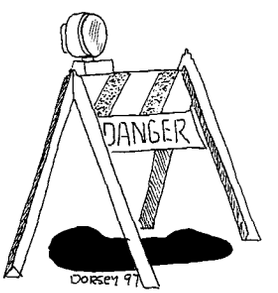
Mariatou, a practicing Muslim who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, always dresses properly, covered in head-cloth, shawl, and a long wrap that brushes her toes. And, at the wheel, I found her aggressive, deft with the stick-shift and heavy on horn and pedal. I had come to accept this sort of driving in Africa, where road laws are few. I was impressed by the contrast between Mariatou's speed, the sharpness of her turns, and the steady calm on her face. This is how one survives on the open roads of an African city, where each roadway is its own marketplace stuffed with buyers and traders whose mobile business dealings spill right into traffic. Vendors port stacks of cloth, trays of meat or tea, cut limes. Children, goats and dogs dart out from nowhere. Mariatou smiled at me. "So many village people come here to the city and they don't understand the risks of the street. They don't know about cars." She did not slow down as she said this and we never had an accident.

I had been in Niger eight months, hanging out in motor parks and riding with truckers and bush taxi drivers, all men. On the road, I spent most of my time in bush taxis, the private minivans, station wagons and sedans of Africa's rickety and dangerous grassroots transport system. Men maintain cars with secondhand and homemade parts, and they drive them on narrow, poorly maintained roads. Road transport exists by men and for men. Women tag along, going to market to buy and sell, to visit relatives, or to take children to hospital where, in a poor drought-stricken country like Niger, the children often die. Malnutrition, malaria, meningitis...

For a Western man, it is not easy to find out what it's like to be an African woman traveling on the road. I found it difficult, for instance, to talk with individual women without attracting unwanted attention, or having my intentions misinterpreted. "Do you want my daughter?" a man would ask. Or, "Monsieur, are you looking for a wife?" Women would not talk to me alone anyway. So I spoke to women in groups or in the presence of their husbands, sons and brothers, until I met Hajia Mariatou.

I had asked a taxi driver friend about women bush taxi drivers. "There aren't any," he said. "There is a woman in Niamey who drives a city bus. I saw her on television." On the subject of women drivers, he was noncommittal. "If women want to drive bush taxis, let them." A safe opinion. He knew women wouldn't pose a competitive threat anytime soon.

In Niamey, the national bus company led me to UNICEF, where I called on Mariatou at 9 a.m. without an appointment. I explained how I had learned of her, about my interest in her story, and that I wanted to write about her. She received me warmly and invited me to go along on her morning rounds in her UNICEF Peugeot. I noticed, clipped to the car's sun visor, a photo portrait of her in her old job at the wheel of a Niamey city bus. At her driving school office a framed copy of that photo hangs on a wall in a superior position above the ubiquitous picture of the current ruling general (which looks out from every office, shop, hotel and restaurant in the country).



As we rolled away from the UNICEF compound, Mariatou began to tell me about her wish to start her own national bush-taxi service. "Bush taxis don't take care of what women need," she said. "I know a woman who was thrown off a bush taxi in the middle of the night with her two children because she insisted the driver take her home, just a kilometer from the main road. The driver got out and pulled them out of the taxi. He threw their baggage out on the road. She screamed at the driver, but he laughed at her." Mariatou told this story without emotion. It was, after all, a common example of an African woman's life, a sample injustice, but one that sticks with her. Her acquaintance walked home safely that night. Mariatou wanted me to understand that women drivers would be welcome at her taxi line, and the needs of women passengers honored. She reminded me that she could train the drivers herself. Her taxis would not be overloaded, allowing space for women and their children; nor would her drivers leave women on city streets at night. And, since many women travel to bring children to medical treatment, Mariatou would offer more transport to dispensaries and clinics.

It's not that all male drivers are a threat, Mariatou said. Some do accommodate a woman's demands, driving the extra distance to home or market or clinic, something I have seen a few drivers do. "But it usually does not work this way," she added. She raised her finger for emphasis. "Money, that is the big problem," she said. "I can't do this alone, and no one has money to give, not even my husband. No one has money these days."

We stopped at the government-owned beverage distributor to buy four cases of Coca-Cola for a UNICEF reception. She impatiently gave orders to two men loading the cases in the car's rear ("No, put them beside each other, not on top"); and later for documents at the Ministry of Health, and then at the Banque Internationale de l'Afrique Occidental, where the bank director had an envelope for her; and finally at a parts shop where she paid for a

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dozen new sparkplugs and fuel filters for the UNICEF motor pool.

On our way to the shop, on the city's broad Avenue Charles de Gaulle, a man driving a Mercedes sedan cut us off, forcing Mariatou to hit her brakes hard to avoid a collision. She raised her right hand and, as if flicking water or something much more unpleasant, threw all five fingers at him in a gesture of grave insult, hoping he would see her in his rearview mirror as he drove away.

But the car just faded with distance. Mariatou said nothing.

I CAN'T BE SURE if Hajia Mariatou (she took the title "Hajia" after making the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca in 1985) is, in fact, West Africa's only licensed woman commercial driver. It seems likely a few women must be driving city taxis, buses or bush taxis elsewhere in West Africa. However, I checked during my travels with transport authorities in Nigeria, Mali, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Benin, and Togo. My search turned up no one. Once, in northern Nigeria, on a street in Kaduna, I saw a woman, driving a Toyota minivan stuffed with people and baggage (a typical bush taxi), stop on a street for a passenger. I sprinted, in vain, after the vehicle as it sped away.

In Africa, women commonly drive their own cars, but not commercial vehicles. I have found a few women who own bush taxis, city taxis, and trucks, but these women don't drive. They do business shrewdly, defensively, in perpetual conflict with the men they hire to drive and with the soldiers at checkpoints.

During the 1970s, Mariatou taught in a primary school for seven years, but she got bored. She wanted to drive and asked her husband to teach her. Then he helped get her a job with the city bus line. "He told me," she said, "that I could drive better than any of the men they had." But now, as a UNICEF driver—a job she found without help—she is an errand runner, really. Such a job is prime, a rare and lucrative find in the dusty capital of a country plagued by economic stagnation, drought, food shortages. A fine-tuned, comfortable, air-conditioned car with a stereo radio-cassette player is a choice work environment in one of the world's hottest capital cities.

Mariatou is mother to two boys and three girls, and the second of El Haji Moustapha Garba's four wives. El Haji Garba, a construction materials dealer and son of a Hausa merchant family, travels Africa and Europe on business. He speaks excellent French, circulates in Niamey's community of diplomats and development workers, and is a devout Muslim. He allows his four wives a measure of freedom, a situation that benefits him and perhaps his wives. The marriage arrangement works like a small corporation with a president (him) and four vice-presidents. In 1980, El Haji Garba sent his first wife 600 kilometers east to run the Hotel Guidan Moustapha, a tourist haven he built in Madaoua, a small town on the national highway, Route Nationale One. Mariatou, for her part, runs the driving school, which her husband started in the 1970s. He handed the business to Mariatou in 1982. Wives three and four handle the household, including 20-some children and sales of milk and meat from a small herd of 30 or so goats.

Mariatou was flattered by my interest in her story, but nervous about the attention. When I asked about her family, she said, "It's not necessary to talk about that." Mariatou does not figure in transport studies; she is an anomaly. Stacks of UN, World Bank and African government studies on transport—dull documents divorced in tone and style from reality on the road—speak of "private capital inflows" in sentences such as "Government intervention in the provision of public transport services has invariably been unsuccessful." A 1991 World Bank technical paper, Intermediate Means of Transport in Sub-Saharan Africa, has this passage about women:

> Women almost exclusively transport water and biomass fuel in addition to the movement of harvested-crops...The role played by women in African transport industry varies from country to country...They collect produce, arrange for its transport ...and finally sell it....

In fact, as several World Bank and other development agency reports note, most women travel on foot. Women and children "headload" much of the food transported across cities and through rural areas. In agriculture, African women carry between 70 and 90 percent of crops from the field to home or market. They carry almost all the water for their families, and collect most of the wood fuel. But the reports mention nothing about women drivers or transport owners.

AT THE END OF MARCH 1993, Niger's citizens were testing what freedom meant. The old ruling general had been dead seven years, and the army, after 18 years in power, was planning to step aside. Elections were scheduled and political parties were forming by the dozen; people beat thieves to death in the streets; bush-taxi drivers and travelers openly challenged soldiers at checkpoints, refusing to pay bribes or even to show identity cards. Soldiers, overwhelmed by the new attitude, occasionally beat people, but most often they let them go. The army, for a few months, dismantled half the 40-odd checkpoints on Route One, the 1,000-mile long highway that crosses Niger west to east along the southern rim.

In Zinder, a rebellious and pious metropolis of 30,000 in Niger's southeast, Muslim clerics called on men to stone women who did not wear head cloths, or women whose cloth wraps hovered above their ankles. The old general and his governors, who had reserved gestures of authority for themselves, would have thrown the clerics in prison. Not now. I saw terrified girls and women running, stumbling under stones and fists through the streets, through the motor parks, steps ahead of gangs of laughing men and boys.

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One night, a mob of men and boys gathered with clubs and torches outside the new government women's center—a maverick institution where women gathered to talk, learn market and accounting skills, new crafts, even typing. After the women inside had fled, the men sacked the building, smashing its one computer. They carried off the half-dozen manual typewriters, and set the place afire. The head of the Zinder Association des Femmes Nigeriénne told me the gendarmes ignored her pleas for help, even as the flames that night dominated the sky.

A driver I knew at the Zinder motor park showed me the burnt cement shell one morning, remarking at the shit that covered the floors, the charcoal phallic drawings on the walls. "This is all so crazy," he said. He was silent for the rest of the 15 minutes we spent there, until we were walking away. "The honest men of the city were not involved in this. It was hoodlums," he said. "This kind of thing has never happened before in Niger." About the latter, at least, he was right.

Nigeriens were enduring much that was new. Finally, people could speak their minds, but the economy was in disarray. The transitional civilian government, when it had money, paid soldiers and police first, but even they were months behind, and the soldiers had the strongest means to extort their pay. People without identity cards made good targets at checkpoints, particularly women, who almost never carried the cards. It is a crime in Niger to travel without them, but in a such poor rural country, where government has few resources, many laws go unnoticed or ignored. To get the cards, women usually apply through husbands or male relatives who bear witness to their identity. This means women must ask the husband, the brother, the father before getting a card. Then, the men question the request: "Why do you need an identity card. Where do you plan to go? What do you plan to do?"

In Niger, I thought sometimes of "Baba of Karo," an oral history recorded in 1949 by the British anthropologist Mary Smith. She spent weeks in the field listening to Baba, an old Muslim Hausa woman of northern Nigeria. Her story, the observations of her life as Smith transcribed them, is startlingly matter-of-fact. "Boys follow their fathers," Baba said. "They learn to farm and recite the Koran; girls follow their mothers, they spin and cook." And this: "My mother was a secluded wife, she didn't leave the compound..."

Baba's story came to mind one day at a checkpoint near Niamey, where I watched a very young gendarme, a machine gun slung over his shoulder, snap his fingers at an old woman, stooped and wrinkled, sitting in front of me in a minivan. He wanted her identity card. She sat still, staring at the floor, hands in her lap. The gendarme grabbed her high on her arm, yanking her easily from her seat and out the side door. He said, "Where is your baggage?" She had only a small plastic bag. The driver and two older men pleaded with the gendarme in low tones, addressing him as *patron*.

"She is old, patron," said one man. "What do you gain from doing this?"

"Patron," said another man, "let her be on her way, please."

The gendarme enjoyed this. The attention confirmed his power. He reclined in a steel lawn chair beneath a tree, munching on peanuts and paying half attention to the men's words. After an hour he let the old woman back on the van. The passengers, including the driver and the two men, ignored her the rest of the trip.

Now, as I write, what comes to mind is Mariatou and the imams. The news of Niger gets worse. The wires report that the imams have called for "Islamic revolution," and the new ruling generals, fearing a power threat, have imprisoned some clerics. The generals have arrested journalists, opposition politicians, and dozens of democracy activists, mainly students and civil servants. The military has smashed civil liberties and, ironically, poses the greatest challenge to the alternative tyranny of the imams. I don't know what to think. On impulse, from my home in Seattle, I call UNICEF's personnel department in New York, my last resource for information on Mariatou. The woman I speak with is patient and friendly as I carefully spell Mariatou's full name, and explain that she was a friend of mine at UNICEF Niger. I hear the woman tap the letters into a computer and I wait, expecting to learn nothing, as the machine searches for several minutes until, finally, the woman says, "Yes, she's there at our office in Niamey. Mariatou Moustapha, UNICEF driver. She's under contract until 1999."

And I wonder anew whether Mariatou believes it is safer not to answer my letters, or whether she doesn't want to revisit with me the story of the thief. I have put aside the idea of calling her in Niger.

THE MORNING AFTER the thief's beating, I found Mariatou in her office at eight a.m., sitting at the wooden table doing her books. She looked up and barely smiled at me as I clapped softly outside the open door. Her energy had returned but Mariatou was serious and preoccupied. Silently, she continued working. I took a seat and examined a driver's manual. After a while, she said, "I'm going to the police station. Do you want to come?" She had to file a report about the thief, but she told me she really hoped to learn what happened to him. The entire affair, the beating and the possibility that he might be dead, had traumatized her. "Everyone knows me in this city," she said. "That's why the thief was caught and beaten like that. I fear they killed him. That's not right." She paused and sighed. She continued softly. "But the police, I don't like dealing with them."

At Niamey's Central Police Commissariat, Mariatou proved her notoriety, moving through the compound as if campaigning, which she was in a way, acknowledging policemen who greeted her warmly by name, and asked after her husband,

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her children, her work. She kept her answers and greetings brief. Her power was in her ability do this alone, unaccompanied by a man (as a foreigner, I was of no consequence) whose presence normally validates a Nigerien woman's identity. Here, a woman is like the dependent clause of a complex sentence—incomprehensible and unreliable if left alone. Mariatou kept her head bowed, eyes to the ground when she spoke to these men who liked to call her "Madame Chauffeur" or, simply, "Hajia Chauffeur." I had begun to recognize Mariatou's power, her talent for survival. She knew when to assert herself and make her feelings known, and she knew when to wait. She sensed when she could afford to push against her world. What I found unusual was that she pushed at all.

Without appointment or delay, an inspector in a blue cotton tunic and trousers received her, addressing her properly as "Hajia." I might have waited hours for such attention. He offered her a chair, ignoring me, and sat at his desk below a picture of the ruling general (then in the process of handing power to an elected civilian). Mariatou's polite smile turned cold. She answered questions in good French, her hands folded in her lap. In public, African women avoid eye contact with men and, accordingly, Mariatou focused on the inspector's desk as he took her statement. He moved his gaze back and forth between her face and his notepad.

"No, I've never seen the man before," she told him. "No, this has never happened to me before." Then, "I'm not sure who saw him try to steal the car. A boy just came to tell me they had caught someone trying to steal it, and when I went out they were beating the man." The inspector nodded and murmured.

Mariatou sat a minute as the man made notes. Then she said, "Inspector, I want to know what happened to the thief."

He put up a hand, a plea for patience, as he continued writing. "Yes, Madame, yes. One moment."

"Is he alive?" Silence. "Inspector—"

"A moment, Madame, please." I could not help but think this was his way to remind Mariatou of his authority. He controlled the dialogue. He made notes. He made her wait.

The inspector put his pen down. He sighed and looked out the window. "Madame Hajia, the man was in a very bad way when they brought him in, not even seeming to breathe, I am told. I didn't inquire further, but I know he's not being held here now. I don't know where he is."

Mariatou was calm, though I was acutely aware of my own nervousness fed by the notion that no woman or man casually challenges an African police inspector or questions him too closely on anything. I imagined that soon there would be some abrupt interference in her husband's business, a sudden finding that he or Mariatou were in violation of an obscure law. I imagined arrests in the night, the seizure of the driving school.

Mariatou stared a few moments at the inspector's chest. Then she said, abruptly, "*Merci, Monsieur.*"

SOME IN NIGER BELIEVE that in the early spring of 1899, a woman (some say she was Hausa and others say Fulani), a sorceress queen who lived in southwestern Niger, fatally weakened a renegade French military expedition. The force, which followed a path along what is now Niger's Route One, had been sent to subdue the West African interior. The facts of this woman's story are elusive. She is known, for instance, only by the Hausa word for queen, *Sarraounia*. There are bits of legend passed down. More substantially, there are the journals of Captain Paul Voulet, who led the force into rape and pillage, and the journals of the two officers Paris sent to arrest him and stop the destruction. The French journalist Jacques-Francis Rolland wrote a documentary novel of the affair, *Le Grand Capitaine*, based on official records and the journals. He quotes Voulet, whose ambitions were blunted by heat, water shortages and harsh winds: "It's Sarraounia," the captain tells his officers. "She's wishing us welcome."

I'm not an anthropologist. I don't understand the full extent of male-female relationships in Africa or anywhere. But I suspect a connection in the legend of Sarraounia, which suggests an explanation for why men need to control women. They fear women.

Sarraounia ruled in the region of Dogondoutchi. She reportedly had spiritual powers and may or may not have been in the habit of sleeping with the most handsome men of her realm, and then beheading them. Queen Amina of Katsina, who ruled to the south in British Nigeria, had the same fetish. But the African soldiers in Captain Voulet's command blamed their nightmares on Sarraounia. There is, for example, this entry in the journal of Lieutenant Meynier, a French officer in the force pursuing Voulet. It is dated June 20, 1899, in Matankari, a village in the Dogondoutchi region.

> There fell upon us in this village a strange event... In the middle of the night, the entire camp was awakened by hideous screams. A soldier was in the middle of a horrible dream and it was extremely difficult to wake him. He said, then, in his dream he had seen our detachment attacked and cruelly decimated by friendly soldiers...

This much is verifiable. Sarraounia mounted a brief, unsuccessful resistance against Voulet; she was never captured. Later, on July 14, Bastille Day, Voulet attacked his French pursuers, killing Meynier's superior, but sparing the lieutenant. Two days later, Voulet's own men, angered by his threats to kill disloyal soldiers, shot him to death.

However, as some argue—including Niger's best-known writer, the late Abdoulaye Mamani—the soldiers may have been manipulated by Sarraounia's magic infecting their minds and turning them against each other. In Mamani's novel, *Sarraounia*, published in France in 1983, he specu-

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lates on a selfless heroine, a female model for Pan-African independence and power, and a model for leadership. "This woman knew how to preserve her kingdom," Mamani wrote, "by the sword and by magic against all who would subjugate and humiliate her."

There is, I believe, imbedded in this tangle of legend and history something more sinister. An unintentional implication. The idea that women must have superhuman powers to accomplish anything meaningful. And veiled beneath this, in the nether world of loose historical speculation that whirls around this story, is the suggestion of inherent evil and betrayal, scorpion-like, threatening to break the surface of female character—the predatory woman creature, Sarraounia or Queen Amina or whomever, capable of sexual intimacy, political genius, strength in battle, bearing children, and killing her lover all at once.

MARIATOU GAVE ME Hajia Ladi's address with these words. "I don't know her well, but I have met her. She is a courageous woman." Now, in Zinder, 600 miles east of Niamey on the national highway, I was sitting with Ladi, 64 years old, a trader whose ambitions got her in trouble. She was telling me, as she fingered the papers in her hands, how she was losing money on the minivan she had bought seven years ago. "I could not trust my drivers. I'd hire one and fire him, and then another." She insisted on holding drivers and soldiers accountable. Ladi challenged drivers, for instance, to show receipts for the passengers they took, and, eventually, she asked soldiers to explain every "fine" they imposed. Radical steps on the African road. Most transporters who are not also drivers negotiate a "fee" with checkpoint gendarmes in advance, but Ladi simply refused to pay.

Hajia Ladi sat the way she preferred, atop pillows on a straw mat, while I leaned forward in a white steel lawn chair in the sandy compound of her home, shaded by high mud walls. We spoke French with the help of her teenage grandson, a lycée student who translated into Hausa what she could not understand of my French.

This was what made Ladi important. She had never been a driver, but she was one of the first women in Niger to own commercial vehicles. She is the model, however imperfect, for Mariatou's dream of a bush-taxi line. Ladi has eight children. Her first husband died; her second husband, a cloth trader, left seven years ago to find work in Cameroon and has never been heard from. Ladi walks with difficulty, with a cane, having never fully recovered from an accident in her minivan bush taxi six years before our interview. What she had to say of her experience was like the stories of most transporters, until she talked about her legs. The left was okay, but I saw that her right leg was stiff. She sat—a heavy woman in bright cotton wraps—with that leg, the skin of her bare ankle chapped and scaled, extended straight out, like a fallen log.

Ladi showed me evidence of her past. On her lap was a dusty red vinyl brief case, its handle broken. When we sat down to talk, her grandson handed her the case. She flipped the latch and opened it carefully to ruffle through receipts, registration papers, carbon copies of police reports, a driver's log book in a plastic folder, yellowing photographs, and all of it stuffed and folded into that square space. "Ah, here is the van," she said, and handed me a wrinkled photo of a Toyota minivan, which was still parked outside her compound, the tires flat. There were photos, too, of a Renault city taxi she owned 15 years before; it broke down after a year on the road. She showed me a photo of a 404 Peugeot station wagon she bought five years later to transport vegetables back and forth between Zinder and Kano, Nigeria. The 404 venture lasted a year. She shook her head. "The soldiers, they wanted money, or they took vegetables. Always something. I sold the Peugeot and bought the van to transport people." That was to be her last gamble in the transport business. Ladi now lived off her extended family and some vegetable trading from family gardens.

"After a few months, I chose to ride every trip to count the passengers they [the drivers] took, and the money," she said. "Otherwise they would take more money than they were allowed and lie about the numbers of passengers. And the drivers would never argue enough with the soldiers. I'm not afraid to do that." She shook her finger at me as she spoke and then laughed ironically. Ladi's humor, her lack of overt bitterness, startled me. She dealt with her hardship, I imagined, through the fatalism of Islam, surrendering her life to Allah's will. Or was it a sense of defeat? This woman had tried to control her fate, unsuccessfully, by monitoring her drivers, challenging gendarmes, by in fact carving out a transport business of her own, and losing it.

One night, on Route One somewhere not far west of Zinder, her driver, a man she had hired a month earlier, hit a cow. The van sideswiped the beast's head on the front passenger side, where Ladi was sitting. "I was thrown against the windshield," she said, "and my legs got badly bruised." She patted her right leg. "This one, I really don't know what happened with it." Ladi spent days in the Zinder hospital and was even treated, she said, by a French doctor. In the end, the gendarmes charged her and the driver with reckless driving, and she, not the driver, paid the heavy fine—it came to about $100—and much more to repair the van. But, she added, "I know the driver did it on purpose to ruin my business. I saw how he drove straight for the cow and he was not hurt" Neither were any passengers.

She paused and looked at me. "And I know the driver split my fine with the soldiers. They all took the money. That's just how it is."

MARIATOU WAS CLOSE to giving up on finding the thief. "I think he is dead, but I want to be sure," she said. "If he's alive, he needs help. But the police will never say anything about this matter."

She told me this as she drove the

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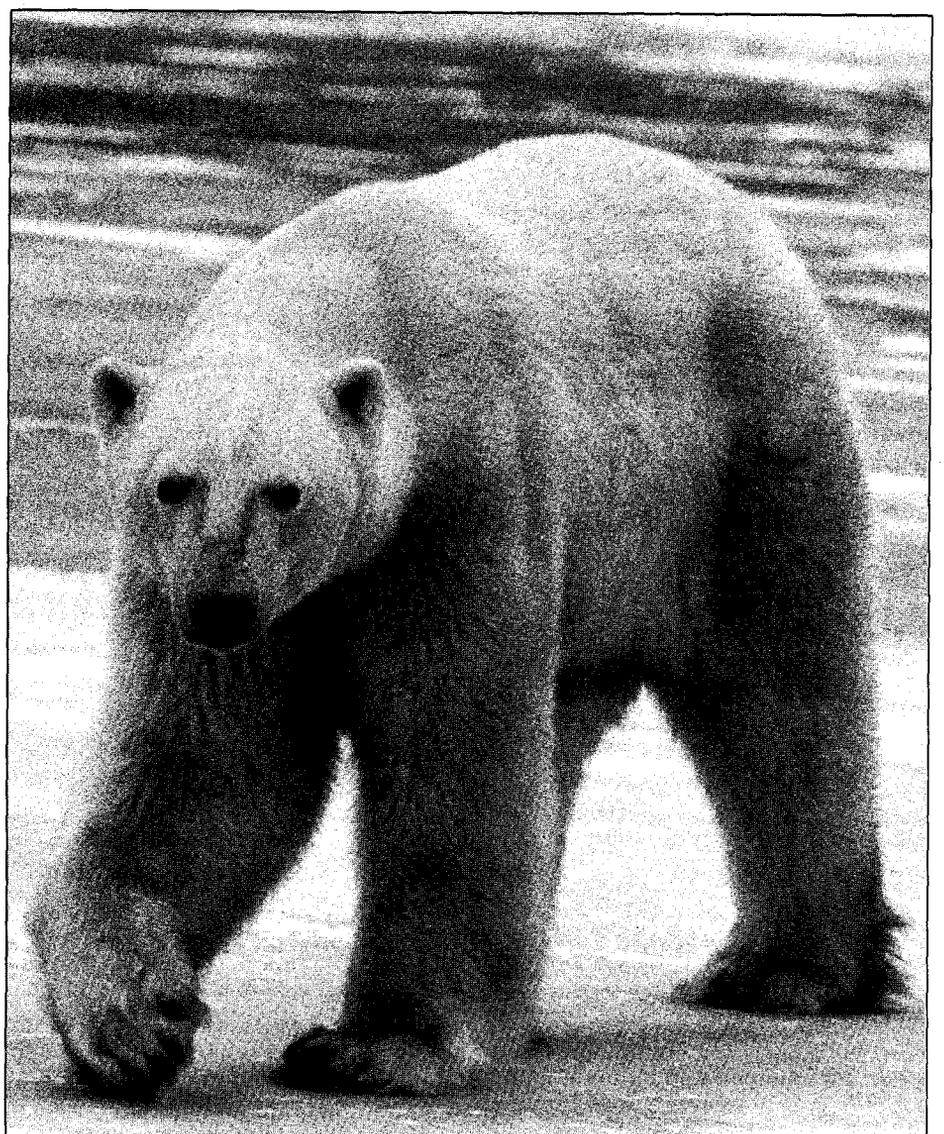

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Peugeot, the alleged thief's object of desire, back to the UNICEF office. We had spent the afternoon picking up and delivering documents: letters to the post office, sealed envelopes to the French embassy and the offices of CARE International, a stack of reports to the Ministry of Health, where it took Mariatou 20 minutes just to get through the lobby as she greeted and exchanged pleasantries with secretaries, nurses, soldiers, administrators.

Back in the Peugeot, we turned off the Boulevard du General de Gaulle (one of the city's few paved roads), near the French consulate, on to the Boulevard Martin Luther King. Mariatou quickly hit 40 miles an hour on this narrow road that skirts Niamey's Plateau district, the residential area for diplomats and foreign missions. Mariatou did not seem to notice her speed.

"We never saw the body after they took it away," I said in an attempt to be reassuring. "You can never be sure what happened to him." The police, so far, had not harassed Mariatou and her husband. She had sent inquiries to the police inspector, but he never replied.

"Aren't you afraid your questions will cause trouble for you with the police?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Why? How? What would they do?"

In the next moment, though, Mariatou seemed to second-guess her own self-assurance. She shook her head, braking hard and then gently as we approached a T-intersection after only a half mile. "I'm not going back to the inspector to find out for sure." I didn't feel like asking her why.

At the T, near the city's secondary school inspectorate, Mariatou turned left. "I know almost everyone at the market. If he were alive, somehow I would find out. I'd have heard by now." She sighed. "He must be dead." Through the Plateau District, the city's only neighborhood with paved streets, she made a series of lefts and rights past large bungalows. Then Mariatou looked at me and, for the first time, she asked a question.

"He is dead, don't you think?" □

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GEORGE B. MOORE

Vagina Dentata

The city spun in its own dark webs of Easter week
prepares the line of worshippers for the fallen candle, the cloth
barely covering the floating Madonna into the slick streets;
she sways with the rhythms of their bodies like Mayan pole dancers
descending in fan into the limitless vault of a yielding earth.
We wait still for Quetzalcoatl to rise up out of the eastern sea
and the rivulets course deliberately, leave nothing
but stones overturned in the jungle. I walk out and away
from the main body of the ruins, into the tropic day's noon silence
built of a special kind of heat, a porous malleable bone ripe heat
that buries these dead. Then whether I am ready for it or not:
the rape of Quetzalpetatl by her drunken brother
covered with vine, fallen, a few stones still leaned as if
disguised by those who found them, centuries too late to save her
from the vengeance of Nahua morality. But she exists
not as nightingale but as stone, but stone sings in this heat,
stone eats the languid visitor to this upper world.
No one doubts Kukulkán arrived, like a boy returning
to the spring where the women's laughter distills the water
and feeds it into ravenous skies. Not that he could rise up out of these
false seasons, this heat like steel at blister point,
in drunken garb wandering endless through his own forbidden streets.
A whitewashed hotel is no reprieve, things buried in cenote
come back to life. On an unknown Mimbres bowl the woman stands
above the man, his erection tasting the keys of her lost history,
the children gather at the buses with sweet cane and bruised
but palpable, warm mango, and the Lady in her season
floats through the wicker of a fan to drum whiffs of love.

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Don't You Fall in Love

A Story by Kyle Jarrard

It was Halloween noon in the East and Ed was trying to remember what he'd been dreaming. About a motel. Exhausted palm trees, dead grass stuck in asphalt. California someplace. A fat young woman at the check-in desk reading the funny paper an inch from her face.

The buildings were pink brick, had bumpy green roof paper, looked old. So had the dream happened a long time ago? Or was it now? Was this looking back on family, or something new? Granddad had liked to go fishing down off the Baja, way back when. For him that was as far from home as the proverbial edge of the earth, thank you very much. Dad and all his brothers and friends would fly out to Vegas with their wives, stay a week, come home broke, get the divorces started. For them the West was the place where a very successful man retired very early beside a fairway with the most beautiful woman in the world, where a man got to do exactly what he pleased for the rest of his life.

In Ed's dream, the parking lot was empty, abandoned, softened up by pools of car oil. No one you knew would stay in a place like that. It felt like the ocean was near it. Like someone was staying in a room there who liked to spend the whole day at the beach, even though any beach in that neighborhood was a beach no one you knew would ever go to. Somebody who had lots of time on her hands. Endless late afternoons and evenings in a small room after walking up and down the filthy sand all day by herself.

Call her Margaret, everywoman. Hanging around in her robe, her fine clothes thrown around everywhere on the furniture and the phone on the night table ringing and ringing. It was always ringing since he was wanting to be with her, was just about to die because he couldn't be with her. She did that to him and he let it be done to him.

She wasn't any beauty, though; it wasn't that. She just had a look to her, the kind he couldn't ever quite read. It pushed him away; it called him. But it was never clear. That was the sweet danger, and he gambled everything to try to know.

But that night she wasn't about to pick up the phone. He could just ring all he wanted, all the way until morning if he didn't have anything better to do. She didn't care, wasn't about to care. It rang maybe 500 times, maybe a thousand.

Then the manager gal got a complaint and came and banged on the door. "You deaf in there? Answer that damn phone before I call the police!"

Ed groaned, looked toward the bleating phone. There went the dream, there went California and all that for now, again. Angry, he reached over and lifted the receiver with two fingers, brought it slowly to his ear.

The voice was shrill. "Get your rears out of that bed. Halloween's going to be over in a minute."

Conrad. Booming, goofy Conrad, the neighbor across the street. The line crackled and hissed.

Ed didn't want to talk, never liked to when he hadn't had a cup of brew. He could never be civil when they called like that. It made him mad, no matter who it was.

"Screw Halloween, Conrad."

"And the poor little children who won't get any razor blades in their apples? And who will dress up like those waitresses in the cafeteria massacre and parade down Green Street? I hear they are going to carry water jugs with bullet holes in them. You can't just flake out like this."

"Conrad, you are not a human."

"I know."

The voice took a sudden dip, became crushed in a mash of blips and beeps.

"Where the hell are you calling me from?"

"The front yard. Can't you see me?"

Ed reached over and lifted open the curtain. The midday light shot in like in that sci-fi movie where the alien thing comes to the window and shines so bright you fall back in terror. The dream was drifting away like a good-looking skirt, around a corner, gone.

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■

LEE NYQUIST

Sparking sadness, heaviness of heart. And mild hunger.

"Well, can you?"

"What?" asked Ed.

Could Conrad still be there on the line? Did he have no shame?

"Can you see me? I'm right here. Look out again and see if you can see me."

"Conrad, what do you want?"

"To wake you up. What are you doing?"

"Sleeping."

"Sleeping? Time to get up. You want to go to the farmers' market? Got to get a pumpkin."

"Conrad."

"What?"

"Conrad."

"What!"

"Listen to this." Ed hung up.

Why did it always seem like you were dreaming when you were awake and vice versa? Why were there Conrads in this world with cordless phones and all their urges?

Ed stretched out again. California. He made faraway California come back. It was just too vivid, and maybe too important, to file away and forget. Phil, his shrink, had said to try to remember everything he could and then to keep going, keep running the film as long as he could. That way they could make some progress. Progress. There was a lot left to be made.

The motel gal was still shouting.

"You going to answer that phone or not? I'm giving you one last chance in there! Either you answer it or I promise you I'm going to go right back and phone the cops and they're going to come right out here. Do you hear me in there? Hey!"

Margaret finally opened up, the phone still ringing away.

"Damn," the lady said. "You deaf?"

They studied each other through the dust-caked screen.

"No, I am not."

"Then get that phone, for Christ's sake. You're bothering everybody. What's wrong with you?"

When she'd checked in with that new car she hadn't looked like the kind of girl that'd stay anywhere near that kind of place and she still didn't look like it. Playing movie star in that nice silk robe from a good store somewhere, Hollywood maybe, her face and black hair done up like she knew what she was doing.

"Nothing wrong with me. It's Ed who's got the problem." She pointed to the phone.

"Ed?"

"Ed."

That was all. Sounded like she might be nuts, like somebody who'd start up some sad or sick story you definitely didn't want to hear. Got her kind out there all the time. Seemed like about half of America ran away to California with some problem at least once in their life. Some stayed; most ran back to whatever misery they'd fled, back to what was left of whatever they'd had. You could read them in a second, kept your distance. You didn't trust them on anything.

"Just answer it and spare me the history. I don't want to have to call the law in here."

"I can't answer it."

"Take it off the hook, then."

"I can't do that."

"Are you crazy or something? That phone's been ringing three hours."

"I'm sorry."

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"Well, if you ain't going to, then I am." She yanked open the door, but before she'd taken a step forward Margaret slipped by and out into the parking lot. Thin and dark in the orange evening light. She ran all the way to side of the pool and yelled back, "Tell him not to fall in love. Understand English? Tell him not to fall in love."

The motel gal stared a little more, like you do when the TV soap opera episode suddenly ends, then shook her head, went in the room and answered the phone. Nobody. Only the hum.

When she went back out, Margaret was gone without a trace, like someone no one had ever known, someone being chased by something awful. Drugs, prostitution, porno films, something.

Ed opened his eyes but kept staring at the scene. Coming to no conclusions, his thoughts settling out until everything was smooth again. It was time to get up. Progress or no progress. He made a mental note to call Phil, even though it was the weekend. To tell him how this California thing was coming along, that maybe it meant something big. They might even be able to work through it back to something important and get him off the couch and back to work. It was time to get off the couch.

Dee'd been awake. "What'd he want?"

"Who, honey?"

"Conrad."

"To go pumpkin shopping."

What else was there to say? Ed thought. It was that simple, that dumb.

"Poor Paul," said Dee. Paul was Conrad's latest friend. "I wonder how long it'll last this time. That thing with Ziggy was just terrible. Them screeching at each other in the street in front of everybody until the cops came. I don't think I'll ever forget that."

"Why can't they just go get their pumpkin by themselves?" said Ed. "Why do they ask me?"

"Oh, but it's cute how they do up Halloween. I think it's cute. So do you, though you don't want to admit it."

"I want to make love."

"I don't," she said.

Ed gave his wife a look. She gave him back the look, then got up, disappeared into the hall. Ed wanted to chase her, make it funny like a joke and get her to change her mind. That sometimes worked, but not often anymore. He thought of calling out, making a wisecrack about her always running away. But she was already too far away anyway to hear him.

So he pouted, automatically, forgetting everything Phil had told him, as he crossed the bedroom's field of black carpet. Deep stuff that silenced footsteps, muffled voices, that turned a blinding white in the bathroom. He did not look in the wraparound mirrors to see his gray flesh.

Even the toilet refused to make enough noise for you to be sure you weren't in a world of the dead, that they hadn't stuck you in a mausoleum, sealed the door. This happened every day now, this and now the dream of California and a woman named Margaret.

But there was no alarm, not yet. Phil had said that worrying about it would only make it worse, and that made sense, for now. Ed was a big boy; he could handle it.

Was that warm air coming out of the vent? He put up his hand. Nice and cold.

"You get milk?" It sounded miles away.

Ed imagined Dee in the kitchen. Opening the box and staring in there long and hard, as if trying to decipher some message among the iceberg lettuce, the cheese, Zinfandel, olives. Ah, there is no milk.

Ed dropped his white silk robe, which seemed to pool and then disappear into the carpet.

"No, I didn't get milk," he called.

"You get milk?" It was even farther away.

"No," he shouted.

"Shit. Be right back."

Everything was a minute away in the Jeep.

Ed got in the shower with Dee's pot of fern. The fern went with the skylight. The skylight went with the white carpet. The white carpet went with the white marble. The white marble went with the mausoleum. The water came out evenly, quietly, and the soap smelled like honeysuckle. You could daydream forever in there.

Far, far away, the phone again. Only this time Margaret was bold. She picked it up and said firmly, as if giving an order to the field, "Don't you fall in love." Then she hung up.

And just sat there. Then and again reaching around and gathering her hair together in her fist. Had she ever kept it that long before? The fingers seemed to be thinking, slowly deciding just what she was going to do with all of it.

The window curtains went green, then red, then gave a bright flash of yellow. It wasn't dawn yet out there. Just like that morning long ago. Decades ago. Ed's mama and some dark-haired man lying on a motel bed. The red spread pushed down on the floor and a big rat sitting up on it like a little dog. The little boy looking at the rat a long time.

Could a guy drown himself musing in the shower? Then again, if this were the movies, the fern would come to life, throw out some tentacles, strangle him to death just for being a human being. Ed hated the fern. Put his hand up to divert some of the hot water right into the pot, instantly overflowing it and sending black mud into the tub. Not for the first time, either. But it only got greener, prettier, dearer to Dee.

Ed wrote his name on the fogged shower door. Then he wrote *Margaret*. Like a child.

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■

"I'm back with the milk!" Dee called in. "You about to get out?"

"Yeah, yeah." he answered. "Right now."

And like a child, he quickly wiped away the name. What if he'd left it? He pictured Dee seeing the name reappear in the fog as she lay soaking one day in the tub.

Ed? Did you write *Margaret* on the shower door? Ed? Ed laughed. Not because it was funny, but because it wasn't, because it was so pitifully stupid.

Like this California business. Well, almost. Phil had said to go to the end of anything and everything that came up. That there might be something there when you got there. Like when the pioneers went West into the unknown.

So then what happened? Finally, softly, Margaret put the receiver back on the hook. That was that. But within seconds it began ringing again.

And it rang all through lunch in Ed's head and kept on ringing as he went out to do some yard work. Phil'd said to do yard work and work through the story while you pulled weeds.

It must've been over 100 out there.

They were putting in some hollies.

"Hey, why don't you rejoin me here?" said Conrad, giving Ed's forearm a squeeze like you might a person on a sickbed. "Something wrong? Didn't get laid? I got laid. I'm not in a bad mood. You haven't said anything in 10 minutes. Want to go for 15?"

That stuff pissed off Ed every time. "Don't start."

"What is wrong?"

"Leave me alone."

"You're avoiding my question."

Ed gave a little laugh to show that he wasn't being totally serious. "Pass me another holly."

Between the sun and the concrete street throwing back the light you could go blind out there. Both had on billcaps, Ed's for the Cowboys, Conrad's from a feed store in Beaumont.

"You guys? You mean you gays? That's what you mean, right?"

A white phone rang on the dirt.

Ed said, "Damn thing go with you everywhere?"

"I," said Conrad, "have friends." He reached for it, then twisted his legs underneath himself.

"The bush," Ed said, motioning. "Pass it."

But Conrad had already thrown back his head and become deeply involved in whatever it was someone was sharing with him, from the pained look on his face apparently something important. Then again he always did that face when he was on the phone.

"The bush," Ed said.

Conrad cupped the phone. "What?"

"The bush."

"It's Paul."

"But Paul is right across the street! Come on, Conrad, pass me the bush. Are you helping or not?"

"What?"

"Are you helping me or not?"

"Paul, let me call you back." He gave one of the keys a sharp punch and dropped the phone like a piece of trash. "That was rude."

"Pass me that bush. You can talk on the phone later. What is it with you?"

"What is it with *you*?"

"I just want to plant the holly bushes, Conrad."

"That's what we're doing," said Conrad. He feigned looking around to be sure that that was what they were, in fact, doing. "Planting your holly bushes. In the middle of the heat."

Ed had a good-size hole dug and was still waiting on his knees in front of it. "You going to give me a bush, or not?"

Conrad picked up his phone. "I need to call Paul back. I can't just leave him waiting like that."

He had developed a technique by which he was able to hold the phone in one hand and still use the fingers of that hand to snake around to each and every button on the thing. Doing this, he drew one of the potted hollies toward him with his other hand, took it by its stem and shook it until the plastic container fell away.

Then he flung it toward Ed, saying, "I don't know why anybody'd want to put sticker bushes in their yard. Dumb."

The victim dropped halfway there.

"Damn it, Conrad."

"I hate hollies."

"Go home. Just go home. I can do this myself."

"Paul?"

"I can do this, really, Conrad. Thanks. Go on."

Conrad shh-ed Ed with his hand and said into the phone, "All I said was 'Paul.' What's wrong? Of course it sounded like you. I just said your name's all. What? Of course I know your voice. Is something wrong?"

Trying to ignore their circus, Ed got the holly into its hole, shoved the dirt in all around, pressed it down. It never changed. Conrad and Paul were like two old women, never happy, always analyzing something to death. How did he and Dee put up with them? How did they manage even to sort of like them? Were they that desperate?

"Paul wants to know if you guys want to go get the pumpkin with us or not."

Ed knew Dee would say yes anyway, so he nodded O.K.

"They'll go. Huh? How would I know? We'll see. Sure. Of course we can put it in front of the fireplace if you want to. You need what? Ed, do you guys have any jack-o'-lantern patterns?"

"What?"

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"Paul says he needs a pattern to cut a jack-o'-lantern."

"You're kidding."

"Ed says, 'You're kidding.' Ed, Paul says, 'What's so funny?'"

"Doesn't he know how to carve a pumpkin?"

"Don't you know how to carve a pumpkin? He says, 'No.'"

"Then tell him I'll do it. Jesus."

"He'll do it. Ed, he says 'Fine.'"

"Fine. Another bush."

"Paul, I've got to hang up. No, I've got to hang up. Yes, yes. No, no. O.K. Come to the window, come to the window. He wants us to look over at him."

"Huh?"

"Just do it. Makes him feel good."

Ed squinted at their house. There was Paul in the bay window holding back the jungle-print curtains. His thick brown robe made him look like he had on a bear suit. A yellow phone was up to his ear and he was waving.

"Well, tell him I said 'Hi.'"

"Paul, Ed says 'Hi.' He says 'Hi' back. Paul, I'm going to hang up. I'm hanging up now." Done, he said to Ed, "I'm going to need a Bloody Mary before we go to the market for sure."

"Kind of rough on him there, Conrad."

"Oh, he drives me crazy. I don't know why I. . . "

"Why you what."

"Just why."

Without thinking about it, Ed looked back to see if Paul was still watching out the window. He was, but as soon as he saw Ed checking, he dropped shut the curtain and the house went back to looking like it'd always looked, perfect. With its maple and beech trees and perfect Bermuda lawn. Ridges and eaves strung with tiny white Christmas bulbs. Shiny trash cans at the curb, new cars in the driveway. Perfect and ice cold.

Two hollies later, Conrad said he was giving up work forever and went home, and Ed went inside. It was an hour or two yet before they'd go get the pumpkins, start the fete and carve them up.

Ed stretched out on the den sofa to cool off, to decide whether he'd just leave the rest of the hollies for another weekend, or whether he might take a quick little nap before deciding about the hollies.

Sure as hell the phone started up. The regular old phone, though, in its regular old place on the wall in the kitchen, just like in any kitchen, just like any regular old phone. And just like any regular old guy, Ed hollered for Dee to answer. Then he remembered she was out again, gone to get something they were missing, picked up his glass of iced tea, walked over and got it himself.

He hadn't said anything before the woman's voice said, "Dee?"

"No, it's Ed. Who's this?"

"Margaret."

You didn't miss a beat. "How's California?"

"What did you say?"

You said it again and rolled on. "How's the surf?"

"What?"

Ed's hands started shaking. He put down his tea to keep from spilling it. "How's the surf out there?"

"Pardon me? Is Dee there?"

"You're the new girl that works with my wife, right?"

"Right. Is she there?"

"Do you have black hair?"

"What?"

"Is your hair black?"

"Yes it is. Why?"

"You're growing it out now, right?"

"Why are you asking me that?"

"I had this dream last night and there was a woman named Margaret in it. Sitting around in some old motel out in California refusing to answer my phone calls. Now ain't that the craziest thing?"

"Excuse me?"

"It was in this dream—"

"Excuse me, but is Dee there?"

"No. But let me finish."

"Just tell her I'll call back. Bye."

"Don't you want to hear the rest?"

"Not really. Please tell Dee I called."

Was this Ed? Was this really Edward? It was as if the real Ed were across the den looking back at this other Ed on the phone. "Wait. Don't you think it's weird you called?"

"Look—"

"I mean, you were in the dream and then you call over here and here we are talking—"

"I have to go."

"It was weird, Margaret. It was a weird dream."

"I really have some stuff I have to do, O.K.? I have to go. You can tell me about it some other time."

"I've had lots of dreams about Margaret. And you know what? You always run away. You run away to California."

"You're drunk."

"I mean in my dreams Margaret runs away from me to California."

"And sick."

"But I know what you look like. I know exactly what you look like."

"I'm going to hang up."

"Will you just listen to me? I'm not being crazy. I just want you to know because it's weird. That's all. It doesn't mean anything. I mean I don't think it means anything. It just happens. And now you call

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and I'm telling you about it. And I don't even know you."

"I'm going to tell my husband what you've said."

"O.K., I'm saying too much, I'm saying too much. Just don't hang up, O.K.? Don't hang up. You said in the dream, 'Don't you fall in love.' You said that. But I'm not in love with you. So why'd you say that, Margaret? Why'd you say for me not to fall in love with you? Does it mean something?"

No, this was not Ed. It was anybody else. Ed didn't do this. Ed was going to regret every second of this. It was as if the real Ed had gone out the front door and down the street.

Then Ed said, "I want to meet you."

"Jesus, I don't believe this," she shouted. "Henry, come take this! It's a pervert!"

A few seconds later a man shouted, "Look here, buddy, I'm coming right over there right now and I'm going to kick your ass! Right now!"

Ed hung up, checked the kitchen clock. If the guy really was on his way over, then maybe it was time to go across the street, get Conrad and Paul and head over to the farmers' market early. He took a swig of tea. The ice was about gone and all the sugar had duned at the bottom. Just like regular life.

And just like regular life, Ed said to hell with tea, hell with the jealous killer rushing over to do his duty, got himself a beer and got on a stool by the sink. Not knowing quite what to think of himself, quite what to say about this thing, whatever it was, if anything. It was as if he had nothing to do with it happening or not happening.

The first beer left him a little angry. Is this what Phil had had in mind? Is this what he was paying him for, to put him in this knotted-up state? He almost got up and called him, but thought better. Phil would only say it was yet another act of desperation and remind him again that lashing out was the worst thing you could do in any situation.

The second bottle left Ed pleasantly neutral, even as Dee came back from wherever she'd been and breezed by with some sacks of something, shaking her head at him. So he went on to a third and fourth and kicked on the TV on the icebox and watched the Mavericks losing to the Lakers out there in California until it was time to go to the market. One of the cheerleaders for L.A. looked like Margaret.

The final score was 131-88. Then he got Dee and they all went to the market. Like any normal people do.

The pumpkin Conrad and Paul got was so big it had to go in the trunk of the car, and it was two in the morning before they got it carved and lit up and everything. They'd started with beer, moved on to martinis, then California red, nonstop, like every weekend. What else was there to do? Sit around and do nothing? It was rare they all went out together, there being so many reasons now not to budge any farther than necessary. Besides, weren't they all worn out? Even Ed, who wasn't working right now?

Yet it was O.K. that just as Conrad put the top back on the pumpkin and led a round of applause and a toast, everyone was just too far gone to go on. As a final touch, they agreed the pumpkin could safely sit in the bay window all night without burning the house down. Then they called it a night.

"Don't call us early," said Ed. "Don't."

"Say 'Good night,'" said Conrad. "Say, 'I had a nice time and thanks, Conrad and Paul.'"

"Bullshit," said Ed. "A terrible time was had by all." But he laughed.

"Ed!" said Dee.

"Leave him, honey," said Conrad. "Just pack up and leave that asshole."

"Good night," said Paul. "Thanks for coming."

"Nice Paul!" said Ed. "See, Conrad? There are nice people."

"Call you at six," said Conrad. "No, five-thirty."

"Crazy asshole," cried Ed, "you better not!"

"Shh," Dee said. "We'll wake the neighborhood."

"Wake up the neighborhood!" Ed shouted. Then he suddenly calmed down, looked at Conrad and Paul, went and shook their hands. "A nice time. Thanks."

"That's better," said Conrad, giving him a little hug. Not overdoing it, just a gest. "It's going to get better."

Ed knew what he'd meant but chose not to say anything. Not to take the easy cue, like Phil'd said, and dump his life on friends. Sure, they'd listen, hear him out, but did they really want to? Not in the least.

"We're history," said Ed, with a wave of the hand.

"You sure are," said Conrad, relieved. "Out of here. *Hasta.*"

Dee helped Ed back across the dead street and up the sidewalk toward their door. They laughed about nothing.

"Wait," said Ed, pulling her aside.

"What," she said, letting herself be pulled, for once.

"Just look at the hollies!" Ed pointed at the dark, strict row along the brick wall of the house. "Not bad, huh."

"Ed?"

"What."

"Did you water them? I mean, you didn't just plant them and forget to water them, did you?"

"Of course I watered them," said Ed, lying.

They went in, locked up. Slipped quickly under the icy sheets and lay there, the laughter gone.

Ed thought of the candle hissing and spitting in the cavity of that huge pumpkin, leaned over and pulled the curtain a bit so he could see it in their window. But they must've thought better of leaving it all night and

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blown it out. The streetlamp shined faintly yellow, and as Ed stretched out again, looking at how the light made the curtains glow, he wished he were sober, the surgeon he'd been for 15 years, a husband, a lover, a man, again. Not an idiot planting hollies in the heat and forgetting to soak them. Nor Phil's patient. Nor Margaret's torturer.

"Your friend Margaret called today," he said.

Dee didn't answer but he knew she wasn't asleep.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you. I also heard you went kind of nutty on her. She said you just about propositioned her."

"Good night," said Ed.

"It's going to work out," said Dee.

"No, it's not. Why do you say that? Why do you say that when you know it's not true?"

She didn't answer.

"I'm drunk," said Ed.

"We both are," she said.

There was no reason to go on, not then. They'd see tomorrow. There was still Sunday before Monday when Ed would be alone all day again. There was still time to sit and talk and work things through like Phil had told them to do.

Wasn't the vent blowing warm air, though? Ed raised his hand high.

"What are you doing now?"

"It's not cold."

"Go to sleep."

"What'd you do, put it up to 70 again?"

"I didn't touch it, Ed. Now go to sleep. It's as cold as the icebox in here."

"Maybe you're right."

With that, it was as if the door had shut.

Only to reopen a few moments later on a motel room in California.

Conrad and Paul were there now making daiquiris in a blender set up on the air-conditioner. Their clothes were torn and bloody, as if they'd been in an accident, but they weren't hurt or anything. Was it a little costume party?

Margaret wore an overtight police uniform and was holding a truncheon in one hand, her pink slush drink in the other.

Outside, a couple of kids kept screeching and throwing something in the pool and diving for it. The elevated highway roared under the dark brown sky.

No one was saying anything, just sitting on the red chairs on the blue carpet. The three of them, like family. Like you might imagine kin thrust together for a funeral in a town nobody'd ever visited, for a forgotten relative.

He'd never had a dream like that, in which nothing happened, where the people in it just stared at you. Waiting on you to make a move. Holding their cocktails, as if it would be wrong to take a sip.

"We're here for the earthquake," said Conrad, as if to bring Ed up to date. "Tell him, Paul. Tell him we're here for the earthquake."

Paul stood up. "That's right, Ed. For the earthquake. Look at the sky. Going to be a real ride. Going to kick our ass."

Ed looked out. But darkness had come. There weren't any stars, nor any lights. The air was still as stone.

Conrad lit a cigarette. "Y'all remember that story about those guys in a grocery store and how you didn't know until the end they were actually on the bottom of the Pacific since California had already fallen off? Y'all remember that one?"

"Sure I remember that story," said Paul, to flatter him. "Hey, Ed. See any horses circling out there? They always circle before the earthquake."

Ed tried to say no but he couldn't talk.

"Get ready!" someone shouted.

Ed turned and watched them feeling around for places to hold on to the furniture.

It was either right then or much, much later.

Conrad shouted, "Did you feel that? Did you feel that?"

"Sure did," cried Paul. "It's coming!"

Margaret lay back on the bed as if nothing were happening, shaded her eyes and looked at Ed. "Don't you fall in love. I'm just resting here for a second, but don't you fall in love."

"O.K.," said Ed. "I'm sorry." But he couldn't tell if his words had come out.

The room began to shake and bang. The men screamed like girls.

Margaret began to laugh and sing, "Henry's going to kick your ass, kick your ass, kick your ass. Henry's going to kick your ass, all over town. . . "

Ed saw himself in a movie being the hero trying to get the drunks out the door before the roof caved in. He saw himself shouting and tugging at them, and them pushing him away. Trying to pick up Margaret, who had become impossibly heavy.

The floor heaving, tilting up and down like the deck of a ship.

Giving up and crawling out into the parking lot.

Where there was no earthquake. Where it was just a regular hot California night, neon lights blinking, bugs buzzing, cars swishing by.

Looking back at the room, curtains shut, lights out, silent.

"Don't you fall in love!"

Dee'd been trying to read herself to sleep and laughed. "Is that an order?"

Ed slept.

In a while she got up. When she came back, he'd rolled over and curled up. He never slept curled up. □

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The Feature Formerly Known as 4-Minute Fictions:

Catherine Gammon
Larry Watson
Peggy Fisher
Michael Erard
Elizabeth Gallu
John Schaub
M. M. Stevenson
Eric Rickstad
Elisabeth Butler

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■

CATHERINE GAMMON

I KNEW THIS MAN

I knew this man who wanted to leave his wife. He didn't know he wanted to leave his wife. He didn't know what he wanted. He wore green shirts with red ties. He wore yellow socks. His hair was prematurely white. He would never go bald. His eyes were dark and flashing and he flirted with everyone he met. I knew this man who wanted to leave his wife. He wanted to leave her in the worst way. He wanted to be free. He didn't know what freedom was, he just knew he wanted it. He drank coffee strong and black. He drank red wine until his stomach nearly killed him. He imagined himself sailing on the open sea. I knew this man who wanted to leave his wife until he heard from a friend who knew his wife that his wife wanted to leave *him*. Suddenly he wanted to keep her. Suddenly leaving was for other men maybe, and other men's wives, but not for him, or his wife, no sir, no way. I knew this man who wanted to leave his wife. He was a little man, a man without hair, a man who wore cowboy boots to make himself tall. It was hard for him to think about leaving his wife because she was so very beautiful, at least to his vision of beauty—tiny and dark-haired and big-eyed, and her voice was husky and soft. But besides all that she loved him, which shouldn't have been a reason for wanting to leave her, but it was. I knew this man who wanted to leave his wife. He was a fat man and that was the reason. When he met his wife he was thin. But year after year she cooked for him (and did the laundry and the shopping and the housecleaning) until from lethargy and pot roast and baked potatoes and creamed vegetables and homemade biscuits and pancakes swimming in butter and all the other many meals she made twice a day and three on weekends, he was enormous and in danger of dying and still couldn't change her cooking habits, therefore his eating habits, and like that he died. I knew another man who wanted to leave his wife. He was a man like the first man, who didn't know he wanted to leave her. He was a man like the next man, who drank his coffee strong and black and his wine red. He was a man like the next, who wanted to keep his wife because he believed a wife should be kept. Like the next man I knew who wanted to leave his wife, this man wanted to leave his wife because she loved him. He didn't know this, of course: he knew that she loved him, but not that her love made him want to leave. He didn't know anything about any of it, not even that he wanted to leave her. He was a man who wanted to leave his wife and didn't know it so he just drank his black coffee and his red wine until at last like the fat man he died. I knew a man who wanted to leave his wife because a husband, he thought, was a ridiculous thing, and unlike the other men I knew who wanted to leave their wives, this man actually left her, but no sooner had he left her than he went out and got another one and right away wanted to leave that one too, but didn't, because it was the second time and he knew now there was no hope, and so he became a husband again and like the others remained a man I knew who wanted to leave his wife. I knew a man who wanted to leave his wife suddenly one late afternoon when he sat across from her in the sidewalk patio of a small café and saw she had a startled look, suspicious and heavy under carefully modulated make-up, coordinated to her peach-colored satin blouse, when he sat looking at her in her shiny peach-colored blouse and her shiny black leather jacket and watched her sugar her coffee, picking up the little blue paper packet by a corner between thumb and forefinger and shaking it down before tearing, pouring, sat watching her eat her pastry with her fingers crumb by crumb, and a chasm of despair opened in his heart. □

JASON KOCH

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LARRY WATSON

THE BEAUTIFUL SISTERS

Forget what you know about the Fennion sisters. This happened back when they were at their most beautiful and least lonely. They should not be confused with the three you might have seen in your rearview mirror in the drive-thru line at McDonald's last Friday night, their husbands off hunting elk on a Montana mountain.

That night all seven children were out, and though the sisters had any of three echoing houses to themselves, they took a bottle of white wine—a California Chardonnay—to McDonald's and pretended their expedition was hilarious. No, this was years ago, back when the husbands fished more than they hunted and not a one of them knew how to play golf.

This was the summer of the excellent strawberry crop, when the sisters waited until dark then sneaked into the patch to steal as many of the Hesburg's strawberries as they could carry. They picked by touch and filled their arms—and their mouths and stomachs—then ran for home, laughing and leaking strawberries.

They dropped their load in Annie's sink, and in the kitchen light saw they were stained with the bright pink juice of strawberries. They joked about the blotches—said they looked like hickies, like nipples, like lipstick kisses (no one said blood; no one), but agreed they must clean themselves of the evidence. Whose idea was it? Annie's? It must have been. The house, the yard, the garden hose all were hers. They shed their clothes—a small pile on the kitchen floor since this was also the summer of cut-offs, tube tops, and T-shirts—and went naked into the back yard, fenced and hedged, but this was still in town, with neighbors in the neighborhood, so the women could not shriek when they turned the hose on each other.

The first spray of water was icy and they hopped and held their mouths against the chill, but soon the cold water seemed the medium in which they belonged, just three more wet naked creatures turning slow circles on a summer night. Who brought out the strawberries? Alice? Amanda? You'd have thought by now they could not eat another, yet one sister held the stem while the other bit the tart berry.

If you looked at the yard the following morning you might have made the easy, forgivable mistake and seen what you expected to see: Grass. Dew. But a closer look would have shown the grass matted in an unusual pattern, as though the lawn had served as a dance floor during the night, and twined in the blades of grass, a collection of strange, loose, green stems. And those drops of dew—did they take longer than usual to fly off toward the rising sun? □

PEGGY FISHER

ELLA

Cold Friday nights in February called for dinner at the café after teaching. They always chose the mixed grill, followed by black coffee. One cup apiece. No cigarettes, not in fifteen years. A movie, or shopping, then they drove the short distance to their neighborhood stiff and frozen because the heater blew cold air for the first two miles.

When they got home they would dance.

They unlocked the door of the bungalow they'd owned for twenty-five years. She let the old golden retriever out and in. He built the fire, hauling chunks of maple from the neat stack on the front porch. She hung their coats up on hooks he'd screwed into the back of the basement door when the children were young. He made the pitcher of Manhattans and put on Ella. Off went the living room lamps, one by one. Then, sitting slightly apart on the Tuxedo couch, they drank and gazed at the flames. Gradually, whiskey and fire entered her blood. His fingers tapped time to the music on one arm of the couch. In the tremulous light, they toasted each other. They slipped off their shoes.

He rose, pulling her up with him, and they took formal ballroom dance positions in the darkened room. He hummed and nodded his head to the music. They began to rock from side to side, then segued into a box step. Memory moved their feet. Released by drink and some long-ago vision of themselves, their winter bodies dipped and swayed and warmed. With the next song, a slow one, she stepped closer to him. She slid her arms up around his neck; he crossed his over the delicate wings of her back. In this embrace, their stockinged feet traced a line of squares across the wooden floor. They danced past their potted palm in the south-facing window, the source of a joke between them, how they'd kept such a tropical plant alive *here*. Now she pressed herself to him while his lips brushed her face, the top of her head. Then Ella finished.

The air between them felt cold when they stepped apart. It was time to let the old dog out one more time, turn down the heat, rinse out the cocktail glasses, tamp the fire. By the time they were washing up and turning back the comforter on the bed, they had retreated to their private thoughts, their secret longings. □

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MICHAEL ERARD

EDGAR ALLAN POE VISITS THE PETERSONS DURING AN AIR RAID DRILL

Saturday afternoon, Edgar Allan Poe, legs crossed and fingers cocked off his hands like spider legs, was drinking ice tea on the porch with the Petersons, family of five, when the sirens began to howl like broken minds over the city.

Suddenly, on the sidewalk, wide-eyed children on rollerskates were grinding zig-zag home chased by Irish setters.

Across the street front doors slammed, blinds flipped.

A man ran to a florist's truck.

Edgar watched this, wondering.

The Peterson mother said something.

"But I've only stocked—" the Peterson father protested.

"—*Frank*," the Peterson mother hissed.

Inside the house, the phone rang.

"Civil defense," the guest remarked. "Civil. Defense. What a phrase."

"Don't worry," Libby told him. She was eight years old.

"Tell me," Edgar said, brushing his lap. "Defense from what?"

The middle Peterson child, a son, came up the sidewalk and fell onto the thick grass to take off his skates.

"You've got to—" the oldest brother said to him.

"I know, I know," whined the middle one.

"It's just a drill," Libby said. She composed her two long blond braids over her right shoulder.

"—water!" the Peterson father said to the mother.

"Let's go," the mother said. She wore a string of pearls.

"You don't have to be scared, Edgar," Libby said.

"We're going? Should I put on my jacket?" Edgar asked. His fingernails were chewed to the quick.

"Into the shelter," the Peterson father said.

"Yes," said the mother.

"It's just a drill," Libby said. She flipped both braids down her back. "I go down first," she confessed.

"It gets damp," the mother said, standing up and stacking the half-empty glasses of ice tea and ice and mint sprigs onto a circular metal tray. The glasses rattled together.

"Damp?" Edgar asked, reaching for his jacket.

"—minutes!" shouted the Peterson father, leaving.

"Hold the door open for me, please," she told Edgar with a firm edge in her voice. "Boys," she said, "around the house. Meet your father."

"Mrs. Peterson?" Edgar asked, holding the screen door.

She stopped and looked at him through the screen.

"The shelter—" he started.

"Yes?" she replied.

"—underground?"

A man shouted somewhere.

"*Edgar*," the Peterson mother said.

As they were walking through the house to the backyard, Libby took Edgar's hand and they detoured through her bedroom. She wanted a doll.

"Bring her then," Edgar said, anxious.

"Look at my dollhouse."

"Bring her—"

The girl had the doll, slim-legged and blonde, in her hand, and she looked up at the Virginian. "Do you know about the fire?" she asked, and hopped the doll through the unruffled living room of the miniature house which sat in the middle of the floor.

"Fire?" Edgar asked, crouching beside her.

"Well, first there will be the red fire." The doll took a turn around the dining room table, which was set with porcelain disks filigreed with gold. "And then the orange fire and the yellow fire." The doll went lightly up the staircase, each step stained mahogany and painted with a light green stencil. "And the white fire, in the end." At the top of the stairs the doll stood for a moment on an oval rug, woven out of red and yellow and black silk. "That's the hottest fire, the white fire," Libby said. "The red fire comes first but the white fire is hottest. If you're outside when the white fire comes, you'll die. And if you look at the white fire you'll go blind, your eyes will get cooked inside your head." The doll stopped in a room whose walls were covered with yellow wallpaper and shook her mass of golden hair as if she were startled or confused.

"I don't—" Edgar said.

"That's what will happen if it isn't a drill," Libby added.

His legs began to cramp.

"They tell us that at school," she said.

"LIBBY!" The Peterson mother, outside.

"Does your doll have a bomb shelter?" Edgar asked.

"Well," said Libby.

"LIBBY!" The Peterson father.

"We should go," Edgar said. He stood up.

"I usually bring her with me," Libby said, and she walked the doll back through the doll house.

Edgar looked down at the girl's small round face, her eyes set in concentration, her mouth calm, and he wanted to have what she knew. He was not so calm himself.

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■

He was jealous of how collected the girl seemed, how she was not afraid of civil defense, the sirens, the houses shutting up, the sudden silence of the neighborhood, the heartbeats, the mother shrieking, going to the backyard, descending into some damp hole to share the earth with the grim unruly dead.

In fact, here she was, playing with her doll.

"Libby," he said.

Fires, red, orange, yellow, white? Edgar did not understand this, nor his fear's anachronism. Instead he thought of viruses or drugs whose effects mimicked death. He thought of awakening to thick percussions, as if to dreams in one's own bed, but finding oneself in a box. Not a blanket but a shroud. He thought of the dark, mystery's blackness. He thought of earth tumbling and piling on top of him, returning to him, him returning to it, but too soon. My body is too young to come home. Immobility. Heartbeats: fast, loud. Treachery. Death. One could be paralyzed thinking about it. Where he came from, everyone imagined it: the puzzlement of waking to the thump of dirt at their head—

"I usually bring the doll with me," she said.

—then their mouths twisted, breathing horror—

He waited a moment to ask her. "Aren't you—"

"What?" Her mother was in her voice.

"—scared?"

—their fingertips scraped off—

She looked at him. "*Edgar.*"

"I mean, to go down—"

She held her doll next to her. "You *have* to go—"

"—I understand that but what if —"

"—otherwise they get angry at you."

"—what if you can't get out and you'll die?"

"LIBBY!"

—their captured screams, their muffled cries in catacombs.

"I'm afraid of being buried alive," Edgar said. "Actually."

She shrugged. "The fire will kill everybody anyway," she said.

"Oh," Edgar said, relieved.

The writer and the girl went outside.

The sky was empty and clear. Flocks of birds, startled by the noise, dashed in all directions, but hardly moving. Under the clothesline in the backyard, the Peterson father rapped on his watch. He was leaning over a large mass of sod, a lifted hatch, a hole into the ground.

"If you want—" he shouted.

"Daddy!" Libby cried.

The sirens droned.

"—alive!"

Libby handed her father the doll. "I *usually* go first," she said. She sounded disappointed. "See?" She was standing on the ladder. She smiled sweetly. "You don't have to be afraid."

"I won't," Edgar said.

"—up!" the father shouted again, his face red.

So Edgar put his legs into the hole. The metal rungs were cold on his hands, and as he went down the sound of the sirens faded and the only sound was the slight ringing of the metal rungs as he pulled his feet off them.

He went further down, he didn't know how far.

The walls of the shaft seemed to constrict around him. He was convulsed downwards. Above him the Peterson father's feet came down the rungs and dropped grass on his face.

The throbbing dark smelled more stale with every step. Where the ladder ended, the floor was damp and gritty. Edgar moved away, his eyes closed.

"Edgar," the Peterson mother. Her voice was muffled and small.

He found himself standing in the vestibule of a small windowless room. She sat on a cot under a naked light bulb hanging down in the middle. Her children sat around her. The light flickered, and their shadows animated the bare walls. Edgar opened his mouth to say something but the Peterson mother patted the cot next to her and asked him to get comfortable. Next to her, the middle Peterson brother and Libby were unfolding a Parcheesi board, and the oldest Peterson brother was leaning against the opposite wall shuffling a deck of cards. When the Peterson father came down the ladder, he asked the guest if he'd ever been in a bomb shelter, and he offered to show him around.

PAUL MILLER

The Peterson mother said his name again.

"It's a regular little home," the father said.

"—electricity to survive," muttered the oldest Peterson brother.

"—*Frank*," the Peterson mother said. Then her mouth moved into a smile. "We don't get to see Edgar often," and she reached behind her, and there was the tinkle of wet glasses, the familiar smell of mint, "So why don't we—"

The circular metal tray rasped across the floor.

"—look at each other's faces," she said quietly, "while we wait."

So they did. □

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■

ELIZABETH GALLU

OUT THERE

This is what I said to my mother when she was dying: "Don't come back again." I didn't say this to be cruel, but merely to suggest she break the interminable chain. I knew she didn't like it here.

When my mother died I went out that day and bought a jar of fifty-dollar face cream. I wanted to look as good as she did when my time comes. Actually, she didn't look that good during the final days; she was jaundiced and without a color application her gray roots were more than roots, they were a head full. Still, she retained a certain pizzazz, enough to share a glass of Laurent-Perrier with me before she went the way of the...whatever. That's how she referred to it: whatever. "I'm going to, ah hell, whatever," and I said "Well, me too, so we'll catch up and chew the fat when I get there."

This is something else she said: chew the fat. And if you stop and think about it, it's a rather disgusting expression, especially to me, the vegetarian. When I turned vegetarian my mother got insulted. She wasn't worried; just offended that I didn't like her cooking, which was not the case at all because Hattie was a superb cook. This was my mother's name. Harriet. But everybody called her Hattie.

Hattie was a drunk. Nothing sloppy. Not one you'd ever recognize or suspect if you saw her walking down the street. But a drunk, nonetheless, who went from this life to the next with the help of Johnnie Walker. I never remember seeing her intoxicated. In fact, she frowned upon them: drunks. "Why he's nothing but a drunk," she'd say about the father of someone I happened to know. Or, once, visiting a family in San Diego, my mother said afterwards, "She's a goddamn lush, that one," referring to the wife, the one who kept singing "Cry Me a River" and asking my father to dance.

This incident didn't sit well with Hattie. She was the jealous type, and any indication that my father might be pursued by someone else caused an evening of broken dishes and shattered Lenox vases. He always denied it, and I know he loved her; she knew it too, but still, he had Latin blood and any woman knows this is dangerous.

I, myself, resist the Latin type. Better to stick with the dull ones, the pale-skinned, green-eyed type with glasses, though I can't say they're a hundred percent either. I hate men.

Not really. I just said that.

I like anyone who's nice, who radiates a genuine something or other, and now I sound like my mother who called things whatchamacallits and doohickeys, and spoke about dying as "this thing." This was her way of discussing the subject.

"I don't know about this thing," she'd say. "This thing is gonna get me." And I'd say, "Death?" and she'd say, "Yes, this thing."

This thing has a way of getting everybody. Last month it got my cat; my boy cat who liked catching flies and pushing balls of dust from one room to the next. He was better than a broom in this respect, only the dust kept moving from place to place, and eventually I'd have to bring out the vacuum and solve the matter, at least until the next collection of debris turned up.

When Mosh died I cried almost as much as when Hattie passed away. He was faithful in a way no human knows to be; not even a mother. He was—how shall I say?—steadfast. And human love is so conditional. An extra pound, a tract of time, a grade or a word or a look not pleasing to the eye can catapult devotion into merely memory of what existed, but no more.

I hate life sometimes. I hate that we die, and how no one wants to stay together and share the bond only time can build. Some people do it. My parents would've done it if Hattie hadn't departed as early as she did, leaving behind a staggering lot who didn't know what to do once she wasn't here anymore. We almost went crazy, in our own and varied ways. One brother went on a year-long bender. Another plunged deeply into debt. The youngest grew sideburns and stopped brushing his teeth. My father went to Kansas City for vacation, of all places; that's how bad he was. And I had a baby out of wedlock because I wanted someone to love.

I know some people who believe in love, and even marriage. These are people I like, and like to be around. One couple I'm fond of has done it beautifully. They've lasted years and swear it's better now than even in the throes of early rapture. He calls her "mommy," and she calls him "daddy," and though they're in their sixties and seventies they are as children with each other, doting and cooing and looking out, one for the other. Whenever I pay a social visit they offer me saki. We drink from little cups and it goes straight to my head so that soon I'm giggly and confessing how I sometimes feel confused and shipwrecked due to the bigness of the world.

Maybe someday this will be my lucky break: to know that someone loves me even in the final hours when sleeplessness and slow decay causes the decline of glamour; when I am nothing but a wreck, though perhaps I will retain the hint of something, like my mother did when she was going down.

Sometimes I wonder which is better: a slow demise, or an unexpected exit. I could look at it the other way around and wonder which is worse, but it helps to be optimistic about everything in life. And death. If you die slowly, then you can say goodbye to everyone and get your life in order before it's not your life anymore; sort of like leaving for a prolonged journey and making

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certain the bills are paid, the stove is off, the house is clean, and the mail is collected by your neighbor.

My mother's death was a long, drawn-out affair, yet she put nothing in its proper place.This is because making order was never her strong point, and the task of tidying up at this late date was simply too overwhelming. Her life was one big cluttered closet which constantly spilled out its contents whenever the door was ajar; out it came—a deluge of balled-up laundry, empty liquor bottles and handbags, each stuffed with gum wrappers, and crumbled grocery lists, and Cross pens, and always the essential Kotex pad wadded up at the bottom of every leather bag. The clutter of her closet could well have been the contents of her head.

She didn't mean to be disorganized—it's just that she wasn't made for this world. Had she been a spray of lilac or a Tiger rose she would've fared much better, enjoying her own sweet scent, along with those of her blossoming neighbors. As it is, flowers are what saved her: the simple art of arranging and cutting and tending to the implantation and eternal bud. My father used to tell her to go professional because her arrangements were that good, and everywhere inside our home were vases speaking volumes about my mother and her world. Of course she didn't want to go into business. My mother never earned a dime in her life—well, maybe slightly more than a dime, one summer at Macy's when she was still in college.

I used to think learning to die was our biggest lesson in life. Now I think it's living that's the hardest thing to learn. Oh, maybe we think we're living, like sometimes I think I'm having fun until it dawns on me at some dinner party or another that I'd rather be at home reading, or buttering toast, and that I'm really not enjoying myself in the way I thought I was in the midst of all these clinking glasses and haha laughter and learned discourse about who knows what. Maybe I'm just not friendly. Maybe this is more than I can muster in a life that requires so much attention to detail.

My mother was a splendid socializer. Her glass clinking was extraordinary. It exuded a true congenial flair, and this no doubt had something to do with how the ice cubes clanked against the crystal tumblers she served drinks in. I admired my mother's hostess abilities, even though I knew it didn't come naturally. She'd much prefer to wander, solitary and thoughtless, thrusting a hand to the sky, pushing back clouds and blue expanse to create a nook where she might vanish, a place to occupy that was more hospitable and relative to her unearthly demeanor. If you knew her, you could sense this. You could see she'd been misplaced, the way her gaze looked beyond people and objects into somewhere distant and imperceptible to the eye, though a mere acquaintance might think she was well-grounded—or at least plugged in to every earthly thing, like shopping and taking time to keep her hairdo always done. She had impeccable taste.

Daughters notice a mother's peculiarities. My own mother recalled her mother and how whenever company came over she danced side to side and sang "Barney Google," thanks to one too many of her blessed Bombay gin. And my friend Linda, who is a mother herself, talks about how her mother, Louise, eats four doughnut holes before retiring each night:

"She puts them on a pewter dish and slowly chews each one, finishing the first before starting another. She uses a linen napkin to dab away the crumbs, and then she washes the bunch down with diet Dr. Pepper. Can you imagine? Diet Dr. Pepper. Before bed."

I don't have a daughter, but when my son talks about me he probably tells his friends how I allow fruits and vegetables to rot in the refrigerator. One day he found three heads of decomposing lettuce in the vegetable bin. "You know, people are starving in Africa," he said, making me wish I'd never passed this adage along. I have to admit I was embarrassed; there was really no excuse other than sometimes I forget to eat. And to clean out the refrigerator.

Hattie never knew this out-of-wedlock boy of mine, and I tried not to raise him like she raised her boys, though I mean no disrespect by this, and it's not as if she didn't do an admirable job. Well, anyway, she did the best she could. It's not her fault they all turned out the way they did; it's not always the mother's fault. And she couldn't help it if the rest of the world was crazy, just like she couldn't help it if she was married to a man who traveled for a living. She couldn't help it if her best friends were a book, a bloom, and a bottle.

I am of the mind to put some flowers on her grave. Maybe some white iris, or peonies, or soothing yellow poppies. Or, I could simply place a bottle of Johnnie Walker by her headstone, and that would say a lot. That would let her know I appreciate and understand her need, her balm; and I am not above my own needs that placate the rough and inconsolable occasions; occasions that swell and multiply until they are more than episodic, they are unremitting and total. Everyday cries for encouragement.

I get my encouragement from after-dinner mints and glasses of dry white wine. In the morning with my cup of green tea, I suck on an After Eight, and then I have another, and still more if I feel like living dangerously. It's not the best, nor is it the worst way to start the day. But it's what I do.

I used to be more conscientious; I used to be the kind you wouldn't like, the kind who tells you what not to eat and how sugar will ruin you, and how a piece of pumpkin pie could be leading to an early and regrettable demise. I'm over that now. Now, I'm eating dinner mints after breakfast and banking on the evening

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Chardonnay to lift my spirits. What ever happened to God?

My mother believed in some kind of God. She prayed when things got unbearable, which I notice many people do. Everybody waits till the ship goes down. Sometimes she'd say, "Let's go to church," but once we got there she'd ask me if I'd rather go shopping instead, and of course I said yes because this meant she was going to buy me something. Something good. But I know she believed in God, and she believed in a world other than this one because she talked about it. "Out there," she'd say, pointing into nothingness. "I miss it."

It's funny. I never asked her where "out there" was. I knew it wasn't here, and that was enough. I knew it was the place we all go back to and the place she seemed to long for. One day I caught her crying and gazing out her bedroom window. "What's wrong?" I wanted to know.

"Oh," she said. "It's lonely in this world. I miss my friends back home." But considering we were home, I knew the home she meant was faraway. Someplace else. Out there.

There is a legacy all mothers leave to their children. Hattie left me wondering. I inherited her bewilderment about life, though I suppose we're all a tad baffled so this isn't exactly the most personalized gift; and whether it's even a gift or not is open for debate because I can't say it generates a laugh riot. My sides aren't aching from being unceasingly mystified. My head hurts some. This comes from thinking too much, and wishing that "out there" was closer to in here, inside me.

Dying words have a way of affixing themselves to the listener. My friend Mel can't get over the fact that his father's last words were "Bingo." And a woman I know from aerobics told everybody in class how her brother shouted out, "It's not my time!" and now this causes her great worry about what's in store for all of us.

When my mother died she said this to me:

"The air is fresher when you do not have to breathe it. I detect the scent of hyacinth. Or maybe it's narcissus. I'm going now."

As she drifted, I protested, but not too much. I knew it's what she wanted; to be away from here.

"Hattie," I said, starting to say more but she stopped me, having one last thing to say when I'd thought she'd said it all:

"When stars look out, guess what they see?" she asked me.

"What?"

"They see you and me, silly."

"Oh," I said. "You and me. Does that mean that even though we're here, when stars see us we're out there?"

And she smiled, and I thought to myself: Bingo. □

JOHN SCHAUB

ALL COOPED UP UP HERE

The cat she all cooped up inside here. We way up here inside two rooms over high up the city flat. The porch it open up to the little slab and step outside kinda but still high up and closed in so. And it too cold step outside the slab now. It too cold even open the porch door since it froze so cold ice coats the slider bar cross the floor where the door opens the slab. Ice coats the window bottoms and glass fronts and sometimes frosts up the outside walls only during night though when other apartments to the sides and up and down turn off their heaters to sleep. It almost the fourth month this cold come cover the city and it all stayed.

The cat she all cooped up inside with me sleep all day and I wake up to watch TV just too much to get that cramped up pain enough to know to watch for only a while longer. The cat I don't know where she sleep or does what when TV come on and I wake up to watch. She jump off me when TV come on and I wake up to watch and where she go and does what I don't know and don't I move to see. I keep covers up round close my head and tucked all in along me and hands come out now and later cupped my nose to warm blowing my hands. My feet cold up only when I stop from moving them aside each one and don't I stop often though. I keep covers up tight my head and all tucked up the sides and my feet moving and time and time my nose cupped blowing my hands. I get up only when TV bad enough to change and it be bad very before I move loose the covers to get cold and change it. Very bad TV be before I move. Then sleep again and TV go off and the cat all cooped up up here with me come back and curls up my chest.

When too cold it gets the inside walls frost too and I take a bath to warm. The cat all cooped up up here with me sits the edge and watches steam water rise up. She both likes water and doesn't. Together we do this and sleep and that's all together we do except for watching the water swirl away the mystery of the tub drain. She watches that close and forgets being all cooped up up here during the swirl. Then back I go to TV and where she go then I don't know for I move loose the cold tucked in sides for only the TV being very bad and not for what the cat does.

TV goes off and the cat all cooped up up here with me come back. The cat all cooped up up here with me look all wrong at me and I see her breath all small and cold. She curls up my chest and wonders when spring come back and she can step outside the slab porch and things all be back again normal. □

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M. M. STEVENSON

THE HELOTS

She was in a bright blue Volkswagen going just the right speed in the direction she wanted to go. She'd always known driving, or rather riding, should be like this. There was no steering wheel, but that didn't matter.

After a time she became uneasy. Which lane should she be in? Could she change if she wanted to?

The car began to nose from side to side, threatening traffic right and left.

She got panicky and began to search for pedals or buttons or levers, but there seemed to be no way of imposing her will on the car. It seemed as frantic as her thought.

She quieted herself with an effort. The car steadied. She directed her eyes and mind to the outer lane. The car glided outward.

A turn-off was coming up. She concentrated. Off! she directed. The car angled sharply right. Safely! she implored as the swerving-off moment arrived.

The whole family had spent the day getting acquainted with their new robot, learning to give commands. By late afternoon they were ready to show him off. The children called their aunt and said she should come. They were at the gate when she arrived. The robot stood by the youngest boy, who ran to his aunt and took her hand. "Come see Dan," he said. "I got to name him. I really like him."

"Don't overdo it," his father said. "Naming him was all right. But he's not our equal. His duty is to carry out our commands without question. Now let's show your aunt what he can do."

"He can do anything," the girl said. "And he never gets tired."

"There's one thing that's kind of inconvenient," the older boy said. "He can't stop once he's started."

"But that's good for kids to learn," the father said. "Finish whatever you start."

"Let's begin with something easy," he went on. "We'll have him water the lawn."

He took a small control box from his pocket and punched a button. Dan raised his right hand and turned an invisible key. The lawn sprinklers came on and arced high.

"It's getting dark," the father said. "We'd better have some lights." He punched another button. Dan's eyes glowed. The house lights and the yard lights came on brighter than daylight and stayed that way.

The father closed his eyes, trying to decide on the next command, and lost his balance but righted himself quickly.

Dan lay on his face on the ground.

The windows of the house opened and shut, opened and shut. The door of the garage lifted, and their two cars backed out and stood before them, engines roaring. The house began to quiver.

The mother spoke sharply to her husband. "What's going on here?" she asked.

He was afraid he'd dragged his fingers across several buttons when he stumbled, he said.

"Well, turn the thing off! Here! Let me!"she shouted and grabbed the control box from him and punched button after button.

"Nothing works!" she said. "What's this gold button for?"

"Beats me," her husband said, "but punch it. It can't be anything bad, or it wouldn't be gold."

She pressed it firmly, but it didn't give under her finger.

"Hold the box for me," she said, and thrust it into her husband's hands. She placed the fingers of her left hand on her right forefinger and leaned her weight against the button.

There was a flash so bright they had to close their eyes, and when they were able to open them again, the house was aflame in every part. The sprinklers now arced fire, and the trees were great candles of flame from bottom to top.

When the woman of the house asked her new voice-activated robot to make the beds, there was no response, and she didn't know what to make of it. She called the Placement and Performance division of Robotics, Inc. and asked to speak with the supervisor.

"You, of course, spoke to her in a kindly way and called her by the name embroidered on her pocket. Alicia, if I remember correctly," the supervisor said.

"I spoke in my usual tone of voice, which I consider not unpleasant, though it certainly isn't sickeningly sweet," the woman answered. "And, no, I didn't use a name. Robots and people are of two different kinds. Names won't change that. Still, if you consider it important, I'll give it a try."

"I'm afraid it's too late for this one," the supervisor said. "I'll send you a new one right away. Better not try to communicate further with the one you have, and certainly don't touch her or attempt to move her. They tend to be rather bad-tempered when they feel slighted."

The new robot was delivered within the hour, and the woman tried to persuade the delivery man to set her to work. He took Alicia and fled.

The new robot, though addressed by the name she wore—Henrietta—didn't move when given a task.

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The woman called Robotics again. "Repeat, if you can remember, the exact words you used when you made your request," the supervisor said.

"I said, 'Henrietta, please wash the seventeen windows of this house,'" the woman said, "and I'm sure my voice was downright syrupy."

"O dear!" the supervisor said. "They don't do windows! I should have warned you, but it never occurred to me you'd ask such a thing. Seventeen! I'll send a pickup man right away, and he'll bring Theodosia, our brightest and best. I'm sure she'll prove to be the answer."

But Theodosia wouldn't budge either when asked to vacuum the carpet, and the woman called the supervisor, and this time she said she believed she wouldn't try further just now.

"That would be best, I think," the supervisor said. "Meantime I'll give Alicia and Henrietta and Theodosia employer evaluation forms to respond to and see what I can come up with. I'll call you back."

But she didn't, and when the woman tired of doing her own housework, she called Robotics and said she was ready to try again.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," the supervisor said. "Why didn't you mention you tried to tell them how to do their tasks? These robots are of a new, highly sophisticated generation, who know how to perform every task perfectly, and they don't make mistakes. But they are also extremely sensitive and can't abide being instructed by what they consider an inferior species." □

ERIC RICKSTAD

A CLASSIC

I like it right there," he says, and places two fingers on the crease where her thigh ends and her hip begins.

"Why?"

"It's where everything comes together."

They are eating oranges, and the peels are disappearing in the sheets. She holds a plump wedge to his lips.

"This is the last piece," she says.

"Go ahead and eat it," he says. "I don't want any more."

His fingers smell of peels, so he gets up to wash the stickiness off in her bathroom sink.

He climbs back into bed. She plays with the orange skins, bending them in half. Miniature geysers of citrus mist plume into the cigarette-smelling room. She keeps squeezing the peels. She squeezes the last one and gathers the discarded skins up from around her naked body. She creates a neat pile of peels on her pillow, licks a fingertip. She moves closer to him and touches his arm with her long red nails. He doesn't look at her. He looks out her window and sees the man next door with his head under the hood of his blue car; the man is out there night and day, getting the car ready for summer touring. It is an old car. A classic.

She asks him what he is thinking, what he is looking at out the window.

"If I wanted to tell you what I was thinking I'd be saying it, not thinking it," he says.

"Oh, come on."

He keeps looking.

"Come on," she says. "What's the big secret?" She jabs a finger into his ribs and he flinches.

"Fine," he says. "I'm thinking about that guy out there with his head stuck in his car like that. That he has no idea we're in here. That I'm thinking about him, and that I'm thinking that, for months now, you and I, we've fucked and talked and fucked and talked in this bed like there's never been anyone else in the world, or ever will be again. While he's primed his car, painted it blue, replaced the alternator, bled the brake lines and installed a stereo, and he has no idea, just like you don't, and I didn't until I came out from the bathroom, that it's over, done, with us, I mean, and I won't ever see you again, and right now I'd just like a car like his, a classic, something I can tear apart and rebuild from the ground up, and rev in my driveway until she's ready to drive off to wherever it is I want to drive off to."

She takes her hand away from his arm and reaches for a pack of cigarettes on the nightstand, knocking over the pile of orange peels with her elbow. She lights a cigarette and squints at him through the smoke.

"That's crazy," she says. "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard."

But he does not hear her. He is still looking out the window.

The man outside has started the engine and now lies draped on the shut hood, face down, his legs and arms sprawled in an X, his eyes closed, cheek and ear pressed to the freshly painted hood as he listens for any tick or rattle in the smooth purr that will tell him the engine still needs work. □

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ELISABETH BUTLER

PROOF

It is important to be married. It is important to be able to tell how you met (med school or law school or on a flight to Aspen), and how you courted, and how rapidly you came to know he was The One—or how you Just Knew. Or how you didn't but he convinced you. And how you were sure (you assured me, even as you were unsure) that I would Know one day myself. That I had that capacity and that vision of love that you had so instantly, instinctively, knowingly, and wisely grasped, without hesitating, long before late-to-never-blooming me.

But right now, it was important to be able to tell that story, and those other little stories of your Husband. How he liked his underwear ironed and folded, and how he wouldn't wear socks with green threads at the toes, and how his mother had trained him to close the toilet seat, and which bets you had about who could fix what in the house.The stories you had to tell with a little smile on your face. Had to tell because they were the kindest, safest, best images of a man who beat the hell out of you when you got home from your club meeting or your baby shower or your church class.

It was important to have those stories, if you ran into someone at the grocery store, or the department store, while you were shopping—for the family always, and not for yourself. You had to be able to say, "It's Bill's birthday—I'm looking for that silly fishing rod he wants." Or, "Alex just joined the Cub Scouts. These things are so expensive!" And then you might look at me and think, "I wonder who a single person shops for?"

Even if you looked tired and colorless, there on the fourth finger of your left hand was a ring, and that made up for any explanation you had to make to me. The ring was the sum and the end of the conversation if you wanted it to be.

It is important to have children, and to be able to tell how many and how old. To have pictures to display in your wallet, to arrange in your office, and to attach to Christmas cards. And it would be necessary and important for me to know which is the smart one, the artistic one, and who is the ornery but precocious one.

It is important to have been married. To have told the story of your meeting, and to have a muddy middle and a vaguely sad yet sympathetic ending. A story of overreaching and overexpecting and overcoming, and then being overwhelmed, and then undervalued and then ignored. A story which would show that you had suffered, had paid some unnamed price, and become wiser for it, and it was important to warn or to educate others, while you secretly hoped that this very thing you were warning me against would happen to you—again. And to be able to say, "When I was married...." But it was a story, ultimately, of how someone wanted you, and proof, that someone had wanted you, at one time, enough to marry you. □

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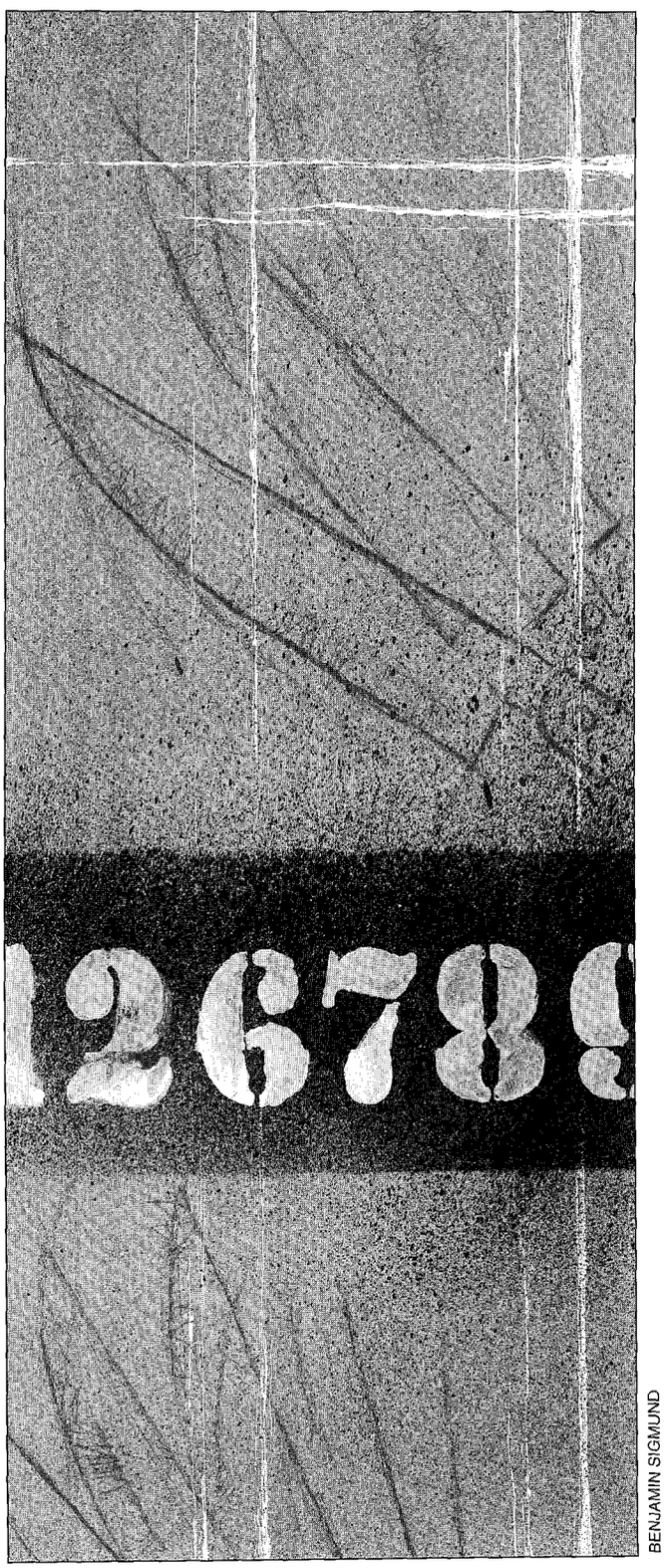
SEIZE THE DAY



BENJAMIN SIGMUND

A Story by William Orlando

"Why did the nigger insist on playing his radio this loud?" Sage said in the Leavenworth night. "Must be tired of doing time. Suicidal," he answered himself, as he sharpened one of his knives on the cell floor. "Arrogant, stupid, loud-mouth niggers. But I'm fair. A white can be a nigger, too."

Merit "Sage" Burns rued both the soliloquy and the N-word. He'd weeded the epithet from casual speech—a feat, all things considered. His alma mater was the California penal system.

In the state joint he'd made his bones with cunning and venom. A virtue of necessity. Back then he was very young, very pretty, very blond. He'd been a Navy brat with no neighborhood to claim and no homeboys to stand behind him. Older inmates had swooped on the seventeen-year-old, trying to press and punk him. "Well, well...Marilyn Monroe...I'm in love." They bled for their affections. The white prison gang liked his style and courted him as a soldier of promise. The shot-callers could always use another gunsel for a fool and a torpedo. They watched him go hard, hold tough, push steel. The dude had heart.

And a will to match. He'd chafed under the meticulosity of his father, Commander John Burns—a precisian in crisp dress whites who laid down the law on shore leave and had tagged him with a bullshit name like Merit. Sage mutinied then and took no orders now. Especially from the tattooed ones in prison. Gangs were herds. He was freelance. Their swastikas and shibboleths cramped his style. They spewed ideology but chased drugs, preying on their own kind. It tickled him to see rivals: two racists, two haters, two defenders of the faith, play heroin politics and kiss each other's ass for a fix. He knew. Off and on, he fucked around with dope himself.

Sage felt the old craving as he held the black-taped haft and ran a thumb along the honed edge of his blade. A good slambola would mute the noise, calm the waters, might even spare the life of that jitterbug playing his music—disco duck music—at this ungodly hour of the night.

He restashed the shank under a musty pillow, spitballed his ears with toilet paper, then stretched out on his narrow bunk and stared at the ceiling. He tugged on a dirty string and the bare bulb on the wall went out. He belched hot air into the hot, thick air. "Pardon me." "Why certainly," he said, tossing on the damp sheet. He sweated and the cell walls sweated in the July humidity of Kansas. He wanted to get up and splash more water on his face. What an effort. He reached on the bunkside desk for his can of Bugler, spread tobacco in a rolling paper and, with one hand, twisted up a cigarette as cylindrical as a tai-

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■

lor-made. The prisoner lit his umpteenth smoke. In the dark a mosquito fed at the soft spot between his toes.

The radio had roused him from a dream—right at the good part where he was tucking it to the ol' lady. She was gone, Suzanne. Just a memory and a dream and the memory dissolved in the dream; 15 years since the shootout. He still missed her; 485 years yet to go. He liked his sleep.

Radios dueled, toilets flushed, cell doors racked, crashing open—and Leavenworth heaved into another day. Sage waited in his 6 by 9 abode. He'd taken a bird bath in the sink to save time. He was strapped and ready; lost in thought. Years pass and the mind drifts. His arms rested between the bars on the sleeve-worn steel. He looked toward the light in the bank of windows—dirty windows, sullied light—and over the top of the walls and beyond. He closed his eyes. He pictured a red sun splitting the dark seam of the horizon. Then gun towers cornering from walls loomed up and took the sunrise away and all he saw were the towers and the walls. He opened his eyes, burning to somehow escape. But to what? And to whom? He shook his head. *Suzanne, forgive me.* He looked at his hands, remembered the blood. Yesterday and tomorrow closed in on either side.

He missed the keys and bootsteps, but not the sudden hollow clunk of the thrown lock-box lever. He jerked his arms back inside. Doors on the fifth tier cracked with a jolt. "Raggedy ratass prison," he said aloud, pinching the creases of his bonaroos. Army surplus draped his lean-ribbed frame. A regular, a California reg, dressed to conceal muscle or weapon. He checked the knife in the waistband of his khakis, under a pressed tan poplin buttoned at the throat, shirttail out. A bandanna wreathed a head minted on an ancient coin. He wore the headband at the poker table or the chessboard, on the handball court or the warpath. Talismanic. Sage leaned against the steel door jamb—smoking a cigarette, eyes raking the narrow tier.

Cons peeled from cells. Some beelined for the hot water dispenser at the front of the range, coffee mugs glued to their hands. *"Say, homeboy, let me hit you for a shot of mud." "Here...now scatter your blows."* Others in Jap-slappers broke for the showers at the rear. In the competition for everything, each man vied to be the first. All against all, Sage thought, as they shouldered their way through bodies.

Sage watched one guy yielding his bare shoulder like a turnstile. He clutched a dingy white towel and was careful not to look in cells or faces—convict faces after another hot and restless night. He reached the middle cell and Sage clapped him on his sticky arm, startling Mud Duck to a halt.

"'Morning, ugly."

"Carpe diem," sighed Mud Duck.

"Don't look so hangdog. We're in Heavenworth, remember?"

"There's no heaven without pussy."

"Man who go to bed with problem, wake up with solution in hand." Sage gave the masturbator a droll smile. "Confucian analecta."

"Ahh, so," Mud Duck said, as inmates on the flats below sipped coffee and dawdled.

"Chow!" bellowed the unit officer, galvanizing.

"My cue, Sage. Let—"

"Slow your roll. I got a mission for you, young man."

"Sure, anything."

"Something goes down today, keep an eye on my cell. Watch the scavengers, and make sure the cops don't fuck over my shit either. Specially the pictures of my ol' lady," Sage told him through smoke. "All right?"

"Drama?"

"Recreation."

"I can, uh...I can look out for your back."

"That's *get* my back."

"I'm not scared to fight, you know." Mud Duck scowled.

Sage laughed and pushed him. The round body reeled on the small feet. "Go fight the water."

Mud Duck—with his hilarious, painful, two inches of penis—went to brave the open showers.

Sage crushed his rollie underfoot and moved the opposite way, heading for cell 501 and the music.

He was old school. A convict respected a convict. Nobody really messed with nobody—you were a stand-up guy, and not some inmate snitch hanging on the man's leg. Knives settled disputes as a *last* resort. *"Hey boss, me and him need to catch a square." "No weapons, and quit when I say quit."*

Sage found a fistfight trickier now. He lost, the winner'd keep beating on him. He won, the loser'd come back with his neighborhood. An inmate despised an inmate. Sage was pushing forty and the average inmate in the feds was getting younger as well as rowdier. Sage had multiple bullet wounds, pins in both shoulders, and a tube in his guts. Tenesmus. Took him five minutes to piss at times. Sage kept knives.

"Excuse me, Randy," he said at 501, gravely polite.

Randolph Wendell-Bey, all oiled and gleaming muscles in cut-off sweat pants, looked up from his seat on the bunk. "I done told you, European." He paused, sipping a mug of herbal tea. "I'm an Asiatic. Call me by my right name. Wendell-Bey." He took another holistic sip—shunning caffeine, nicotine, meat protein and any drug that lacked cash or trade value. "You got a problem with that?"

"You got a problem keeping your radio down?"

"You just don't like black music."

"I don't like any music at three in the morning."

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"Then keep your fool ass outta prison."

The lifer nodded slowly, nodded also at the Asiatic's white, raunchy centerfolds pinned to the corkboard above the wall desk. "How far we gotta carry this? I'm telling you, for both our sakes—"

"Ain't a motherfucka here can tell me shit. I'm free, black and twenty-one." He grinned, setting the mug beside the radio on the hinged flip-up desk, then cranked the music and began popping his fingers. "Hook it," he told the old man, who glanced around and saw potential rats on the tier.

"All right, Randy. I step to you again, we're dancin'." He sauntered off as Wendell-Bey leaped up to the bars.

"Peckerwood, you best stay far away from me as Jesus did from sin."

"Lay down and lick your nuts."

Their voices had risen and traffic on the tier idled. Others leaned from doorways, hopeful.

"Hey-hey, yo! I'll thrill your racist world, talkin' crazy to me. Bust you up decent. You piece a white shit."

"Shit?" Sage stopped a cell short of his and turned. "That's more your complexion, ain't it?"

Muscles walked. Cons shrunk back. Steel flashed.

"You pull a knife on me, I'll make you use it."

"Thanks."

"You can't handle me, fool."

"Fuck the rap, toad." Sage crouched, twirling the shank like a baton. "Let's get some rec."

Wendell-Bey—a master of the bluff by dint of his size—paused.

They closed.

"Hey you two! Hey!" Keys contrapuntal to boots. "Freeze on the tier!" The guard peered down from the front end as convicts stepped from cells to block his view. He waded through them, a crusader. "Burns..." Knife behind leg, Sage thought fast. Toss it, and risk bringing heat to a cell that might already be dirty; run, and get rat-packed by angry guards. He saw Randy weave through bodies and cut around the rear corner. What's a little pain, reasoned the man who'd also lost his front teeth to a deputy's flashlight in the LA County Jail. It took him an instant to think, one to move, and another to feel a restraining tug on his knife hand. Mud Duck toweled steel and then brushed by the approaching guard. "...Burns," said Crimedog. "What's that in your hand?"

Sage palmed his crotch and looked innocent. "My dick?"

"Grab the bars."

He didn't, playing the edge.

"We can do it the easy way here, or the fun way in the hole. Don't make me put on my ugly face."

"You ain't never took it off."

"A direct order, inmate. Let me shake you down."

"I'm no inmate. I'm a convict, a real one."

"Whoopee-do. Now let me shake you down."

"Shake your mama down," muttered a voice to general agreement.

"I already did. Burns?" The cons had a grudging respect for Crimedog. The bastard was fair, walked the tiers alone, and wouldn't push deuces—the red button on the hip-holstered radio—for too little. The alarm would bring the cavalry pounding.

After Sage turned around and spread, the guard planted a boot between the prisoner's spaced feet. He sliced fingertips down the spine, reached round and palmed the chest and belly and waistband; then two-handed each arm and, bending, two-handed each leg, sweeping down one and up the other—the pat, the squeeze, the graze of the crotch.

"Show's over, fellas." The correctional officer backed up, brushing off his hands. The audience scattered for chow hall or cell. Sage—gritting teeth and partial plate— turned.

"Get a real job, Crimedog."

"What the fuck for? I love this shit." He grinned under a red handlebar mustache. "I get a hard-on when I come through the gates."

"I believe you."

"Burns...something wrong?"

"Nada. Nada fuckin' thing."

"I'm not blind."

"I'm not a model inmate."

"I know. I'm watching. We both got time."

"But nothing personal. Right, boss?"

"Just doing my job."

"Yeah, well." He shrugged at the C.O. "You catch me, shame on me. It's all in the game." Sage eased on down the tier.

Mud Duck plopped down on a chow hall seat, and dove into a breakfast of shit on the shingle. He slurped milk, shoveled prunes, smacked toast. People respected his evident wish for privacy.

Sage's table manners rivaled Mud Duck's, but Sage ate fast out of habit. Before the frills of reform, a prisoner had just enough time to spoon down the tasteless beans. A dining room back then looked utilitarian and stark. There was no bison head, no wild-west painting, no artsy-craftsy stuff hanging on the wall. There were no kaffee klatsches over red and white checkered cloths. No seconds. Mud Duck got up and stole back into line behind the last man.

He plucked another cafeteria tray and plate from the stacks, then reached inside a mock covered wagon for the plastic utensils. He found the decor too bright and perky. Flowers on graves, he thought, thrusting his tray

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at a harried line server. He sat back down, plate heaped with creamed chipped beef.

Leavenworth fed. Food quality changed with food administrator. The current chieftain, like many employees in the system, was ex-military. This one took pride in his work.

"How's the food, boys?"

"Screamin', Boss Hog."

"Good, good." He'd nod his big gray head and amble over to the next table, knowing that a full belly was a docile belly.

Mud Duck ate and never got full. He masturbated and ate and ate and masturbated and was still hungry, still sad and worried, still afraid. He reached across the checked plastic cloth, pinched napkins from the holder, and began wrapping leftover toast. He leaned back in the legless chair and stuffed khaki pockets with the snack—something to tide him over till lunch. The seats of hard plastic were bolted onto extenders branching from the table post. Priorities. The design made mopping easier, but cramped two people side by side and two across. Mud Duck filled about one and a half of the chairs. He was ballooning. Good. Who'd rape a fat slob?

They eyed him when they passed his cell. "Hello, duckling." Clowned him in the shower. "Is that a dick or a clit?" Spoke to his back. "Look at the rump on that chump." He felt a little like a woman in the world of men.

But Sage was there. "Y'all fuck with him, you fucking with me. Got that?"

He'd come up a runt. The girls he liked patted him on the head and called him cute. In a carload, the guys stuck him in the middle seat—sitting pussy. No respect. Only behind closed eyes could he set the world to rights. Naked women clung to his legs, reaching for his stud cock. *Easy, ladies, the night is still young.* Crowds parted for him and men followed his lead. He dreamed of romance and quest and scimitars in the sun. The lover, the man, the ultimate warrior. Mud Duck of Arabia.

He waddled from table through crowd to noisy scullery window, brushing against sleeves. "Sorry...excuse me...my fault." He dumped the plasticware, stood aside, and looked for a suspicious face to follow. He had a wide choice. A con with a swastika inked on his bull neck approached him.

"Duck, block that hack at the door for me."

An aproned cook had slipped the bruiser belts of hooch-making sugar and Saran-wrapped hamburgers. They stole for their hustle. Free enterprise.

"I'd be glad to, Monster, but I gotta sneak my own—"

"Shut up." Monster tilted his shaved head at roly-poly. At a weak link. One slap away from being a snitch or a fuck-boy. "I'm not askin' ya, lame. I'm tellin' ya."

A sentinel manned the doorway, patch on his shoulder. Every day Correctional Officer Vandyke wore the optional red tie, his sunglasses indoors, and found some inmate to write up or strip search. He never met a rule he couldn't enforce. A rookie bucking for warden. He also reported on slackers among his fellow guards. He spoiled their chair time. They longed to meet him after work. But he was untouchable. He came from a dynasty of Vandykes, positioned high and low throughout the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Vandyke watched scum as it jostled and jive-talked its way out the door. Rapists. Cutthroats. Thieves. They'd walk off with the kitchen unless you patted them down. These idiots always tried to outsmart him. One suspect held Vandyke's eyes while edging away.

"Come here, slick."

"What for?"

"Dump your pockets."

"All I'm holding is some bread," stalled Mud Duck, letting Monster stroll past with the *clavo* under his shirt. "Don't sweat the small stuff, man."

"Man?" The C.O. tapped his name tag. "Officer Vandyke, inmate."

Frowning at authority, Duck dropped his snack on the pile at the booted feet.

"You're in violation." Vandyke rattled off policy, chapter and verse. "Any food leaving the mess facility without express authorization, or a food article not in its original container, is contraband. Contraband. Says so right in your inmate manual, can't you read?"

He read binary code, and was the only inmate in the computer class who wrote bug-free programs on the first run. But their eyes saw only a mud duck. He looked down, wanting to knock the smirk off this guard's face with a *malleus malificarum*. He hated guards and Vandyke hated inmates. Bait one into indiscretion, then toss his ass in the hole. Disciplinary wasn't all bad, Duck now decided. Room service. Jack off in relative repose. Freedom from hacks and from troglodytes like Monster or that soi-disant Muslim, Wendell-Bey.

"Officer VanDick." He looked up. "Go auto-fellate."

Randy had escaped to the weight pit in the sunny yard, his hands gloved and his chest bare. Around him heavy plates were clanking onto bars. Hard men pumped iron and bellowed out grunts, impressing themselves. Randy's spotters stood poised at his arms. He grunted the loudest, as he heaved weights and mulled over the politics of murder.

Word sped from mouth to ear in the boring village prison. He was taken aback at the number of guys—black, white, brown—who'd stepped to him advising the peace pipe. "Man, Sage ain't no joke...plus he's a

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good convict." Another strand in the web was Chino, Sage's road dog. Randy knew Chino as Charley. Met that "crazy, halfbreed-ass nigga" way back in Juvenile Hall. They'd had a little drama. There was an old scar between them. Small world, Randy thought—dripping sweat under a weighted and collared bar.

The man prided himself on his intellect. He'd choose the time and the place. Or let his posse bear the brunt of battle, ride the beef, and spend five years slammed down in the control unit at Marion, Illinois. Between sets of military's he did some chest-thumping for the fellas.

"Naw, fuck what all those fools say. I oughta butcher 'em both."

"But what about that package we got jumpin' off—the mule don't pee on himself in the visiting room."

"The brother's right, Bey. We can always peel their caps later."

"I hear y'all, but this is me—Wendell-Bey. I wanna crush 'em bad."

"Why front yourself off?" Two muscled young men added wheels to an Olympic bar, now spotting Randy's bench press. "Let's just hire some ol' dope fiends. Shit. For a few grams, they'd jump King Kong."

So would those three. They were buried with time. They sharpened steel, moved drugs, and pinched Mud Duck on his plump white butt.

"Fuck it," Randy said tightly. "I'll chill for now." He heaved the bar off the rack. "Apologize, even."

"Get money, Bey! Manhandle that bitch!"

The man roared and pushed 500 pounds of prison from his chest.

"I might have gotten beside myself. You know, stressed out. We don't need to be beefin'."

"Fine by me, Wendell-Bey. I'd rather fight for you than against you."

Burns and Wendell shook hands.

Moodily, Sage was walking the asphalt track around the field. *Damn this gladiator shit. Getting too old. I'm all in.* A voice raspy with age, cigarettes, and 45 calendars in jail stopped him between the high bleachers and the softball diamond.

"You look down low, youngster. You okay?"

Sage straightened his shoulders—alarmed that, along with graying temples and talking to himself, he was showing signs of wear.

"Speedy, my man. If it ain't rough, it ain't right."

"Amen...heard about you and that nig. Don't let him rock you to sleep, now."

"Yeah, well, only the good die young."

"Say—next time that fire dope hits, throw an old dog a bone."

"I'll bless you right off the top," said Sage, his finger in every pie. "You know how we do it. Grandpa."

"Watch your mouth, now." Spryness darted off, outpacing death. "Gotta go check my traps."

Some filed writ after vain writ. Some found religion or drugs or a cell wife. Some just shuffled along, waiting for the last time their name and number would appear on the daily change sheet: *parole to the morgue.*

Sage was having none of that. He'd come too far to cop deuces now. Forty feet of wall? He'd learn how to levitate.

Books opened doors. He held a master's in Sociology from Kansas University, and was nudging Chino along the same path. "At some point we gotta ask more of life than can I eat it, fuck it, or steal it." His droll smile.

He'd left his roadie still asleep in the cellblock. Still bum-kicked in that first year or so of mourning. Chino was quiet as a cobra. Worried Sage. His partner could end up like Speedy—parlaying a dime into a life bid.

They were opposites. Sage couldn't walk down center hall without shaking everybody's hand. Chino would arch a thick black eyebrow at him. "Mr. Ambassador. Mind if we get outside before they lock the fucking yard gate?" Sage knew their friendship defied tribal mores. You couldn't get around the race thing. People thought they were queer for each other.

Sage's mother was just happy her son had a good friend. Merit, her angel with the cowlick. Her golden, beautiful boy gone wrong and locked up for life with all those damn criminals. Moms was white of hair now. She'd always stood by him. But at what price, Sage had finally come to wonder.

Suzanne too had loved him like a rock. Followed her outlaw prince into the banks, and was shot dead.

Sage exhaled.

He climbed the bleachers. He sat on the top row. He one-handed paper and tobacco into a cigarette, struck a match and lit the rollie to the bite of sulphur and smoke. *"Sage, thought you said you were quitting tomorrow." "I said mañana. Mañana just means not today."* He squinted. The morning was bright, heat building. Shirtless men lazed in the grass and the sun. His brother Aryans, he noted, liked their tans. He would have ditched his own shirt, but a scarred-up torso drew stares. Made you seem a victim. Gave people ideas. Chickens pecked the pecked chicken. Maybe he was just a casualty of himself, he thought—as smoke plumed from his nostrils.

"Attention yard and quarters," boomed the loudspeakers. "The hourly ten-minute move is now in progress."

He took that last deep drag and tossed the butt, then rose, hitching creased and immaculate pants. He paused to look over the wall into the distance. Empty space stretched as far as Sage could see. His eyes flicked up. The sky was blue, with a drift of galleon clouds. □

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ANN KING

Eileen

My friend, Eileen, up and died one morning, and I mean that. She got out of bed, walked into the kitchen, and died, right beside the stove.

No autopsy. Her son said it was a waste of time.

"Her heart gave out or something," he told me that night.

"Well, no kidding something gave out," I said back. "Don't you want to know what?"

He shrugged. Todd and I never got along, not ever in the thirty years since I met Eileen.

She was 22, maybe 24, when I started watching her stroll Todd down my street past my apartment building every morning around 10. He was probably two by then and I knew right off he didn't like me. I made it a point to bump into them one morning while I was, coincidentally, coming home from the bakery with a box of cookies. The bribe failed. Todd twisted his face and started to cry when I bent down beside his carriage.

"Todd doesn't like cookies," Eileen explained. "But I'd love one."

She smiled at me with her face so close that the gentle morning breeze swept her long, brown hair against my cheek and I worried she might see on my face what I felt in my heart. I still get a catch in my throat when I think of her smiling at me that way.

Coincidentally, we kept bumping into each other, until, finally, I felt sure we were friends. She'd bring Todd to my apartment some days and we'd watch *Search For Tomorrow* and eat peanut butter and banana sandwiches and try to get Todd to take his nap. Sometimes I'd go to her house in the afternoons to play rummy. I'd usually leave when her husband, Ed, would get home because he didn't like me much either.

"She's a mouthy broad," I heard him say once when he thought I was out of ear shot. "And she's ugly too. I don't know why you like her."

"Because she likes me," Eileen answered.

Ed died of a terrible cancer. Long and painful, which befitted him, I thought, though I never said that to anyone, except Eileen since she, above all, understood.

Anyway, when Ed died, that's when I moved in with Eileen. That was nearly five years ago. I got five and Ed got thirty-three.

When Todd told me he didn't care to know how his mother died, I figured I better let it go because she wouldn't want us fighting now. She always said that to us: "Can't you two be friends?" We never had to answer that.

The older Todd grew, the worse it got between us. He was barely old enough to talk when I first met him, then, after a year or two, he wouldn't shut up. He'd call me names and say I was ugly and fat and his mother would scold him. Eileen would always apologize to me then. I was glad when Todd finally started going to school.

Between Todd and his father, it's a wonder I ever managed to spend time with Eileen. But we did manage. Ed's sister told me once that Eileen had a right to have girlfriends no matter what Ed said. She said Ed should go soak his head and take Todd with him. I always liked Alice.

So Eileen up and dies, and Todd's coming to clean out the house. He says he's gonna sell it and set up college funds for his two kids with the money. His kids never liked me either. I don't mind about the house or the money. I just want a few photographs and the black and gold barrette Eileen always wore to pull back her long, brown hair. □

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Vision

DAVID HELLERSTEIN

1. Seeing Mahmoud

LET'S GET OUT OF HERE! Dad said that day, surprising us all.

We checked with the nurses—it was okay with them—and we wheeled Dad off the unit, and through the lobby, and down into the sunny sky-lit atrium beside the cafeteria. We ate, balancing our lunches on plastic trays. Dad was feeling wonderful *(better than I have any earthly right to feel!)*. He kept telling how he had to get his upper-body strength back, especially since he couldn't walk anymore: he wheeled himself three times around the perimeter of the atrium, the wheelchair's rubber tires squealing against the tiles. It was a Saturday afternoon, and the steroids had kicked in.

Then he wanted to go see Mahmoud.

I need to talk to him, he said. Mahmoud is the department Chairman, the head of Medicine, an Egyptian, a wonderful man. He explained why: first something about getting another consultation about his condition, then going into a medical paper they were going to write together, then something about giving Mahmoud advice about running the department.

I don't think that's a good idea, I said. Anyway, it's Saturday, I doubt anyone's in.

I want to see Mahmoud!

The look on his face was something I never wanted to see.

Okay, I said. Fine.

Dad wheeled himself onto the elevator, told me to press 2, then irritably wheeled himself off, and we followed him down the hallway, all six of his children, four of us doctors, and assorted spouses and grandkids. Through heavy wooden doors and into the plush, darkened offices of Department of Medicine, Administration. We went around the big rectangle of Administration a couple of times, all fifteen, eighteen of us, looking for Mahmoud.

Of course Mahmoud was not there, no one was there, and we took him back to his room. Dad didn't want to visit anymore, he wanted all the grandkids out. By that time, the stomach pain had started again. Maybe a medicine side-effect, more likely spread of the tumor. We held hushed conversations in the hallway, we reviewed the medication order-sheets. What could be done? Wasn't it worth operating, even if he was to get only a few days or weeks of relief?

Daniel said he'd talk to the surgeons.

And that was about it.

We all flew home, and waited for the call.

2. The Shadow

DURING THESE MONTHS, a shadow had begun to rise. Like some new dark moon, it ascended over the bridge of my nose, its margins flickering like a string of Christmas lights. It taunted me while I read, it curtained my view out the window of the MetroNorth commuter train. Oddly, I could see this new planet only with my right eye: from my left eye, the world remained entirely normal.

Psychosomatic, I reassured myself, *probably migraine*, and popped Advil.

And for weeks I ignored the rising phantom.

Now that the baby, our third, was nearly due, Lisa and I were constantly at the hospital. One false labor after another, days of walking on the sidewalks around the medical center, suitcases in hand.

Finally, one morning, the contractions came hard and regular. From up in Westchester we tried to reach the doctor in Manhattan. Every seven minutes, every five, another contraction. After an hour, we discovered that our telephone was not receiving incoming calls, so we began driving in.

By the time we reached the FDR Drive, the contractions were coming every three minutes. Lisa began LaMaze: *hee hee hee, hee hee hee.* In my right eye, nearly half the world had disappeared.

"I think I'm in transition!" she said.

"Go back!" I yelled.

"I wish I could!" she yelled back, puffing hard.

Finally, we swerved off the FDR, into the hospital parking lot, found a wheelchair, and ran for Labor and Delivery. Twenty minutes later our baby was born, vigorous and healthy, a boy.

It could not be migraine, I realized, not in one eye. Though I've forgotten a good amount of neuroanatomy since medical school, I do recall the optic pathways—which begin at the back of the retina, that inner, inside-out skin of light-sensitive cells that allows us to recreate colors and shapes in our brains. Behind the retinas form the optic nerves, one for each eye, which join and cross at the "chiasm," just below the pituitary gland, and then separate or "decussate"—fibers from one half, one field, of vision proceeding to each half of the brain, where half-images of the world seamlessly reunite.

Anything in the brain, say a tumor, would affect both eyes. So it

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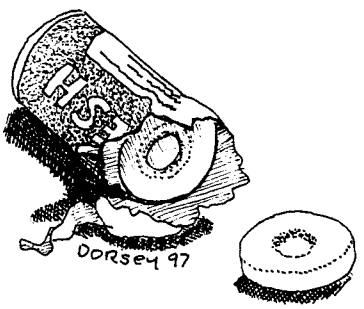
wasn't a brain problem. Two possibilities remained: either the optic nerve was compressed somewhere behind my right eye (maybe in the pituitary gland), or something was wrong with the eye itself.

Like all doctors, I hate crossing from the healing side of the great divide. But finally—less than a week after our son was born—I made an appointment with a specialist, a retina surgeon, who began to examine me and then excitedly called his partner in from the next room ("Look what this guy's been walking around with!"), confirming what I had dreaded: The dark moon was no migraine, no psychosomatic response to stress.

"Your retina's detached," he told me, "any minute it could completely tear away, and you'd lose your vision in that eye forever." It was the result, he said, of a congenital anomaly, a bulge at the back of the eye.

He booked me for surgery.

"When can I get on an airplane?" I asked. "I have to see my father."



Two days after the operation, I climbed out of my sickbed, and Lisa and the baby and I got on a plane for Cleveland. I was wearing sunglasses and squinting my injured eye shut: it hurt too much to wear a patch. Whenever the eye opened, a furious red world poured into my head, clamorously bright, shimmering, dazzling. The eyeball was shrunken, scarlet, oozing, and painful, criss-crossed with black stitches like a tiny baseball. Four times a day I wedged the lid open and, helpless, gazed upward while Lisa put three kinds of drops inside. Antibiotic, anesthetic, dilating medication. But at least I could see: surgery had been a success.

When we arrived at the hospital, everyone was there. A profound sense of wooziness overcame me, as if I could perceive our globe itself whirling headlong through the blackness of the galaxies. Holding the baby close, I followed Lisa into the room.

We greeted each other, hugged, we showed the baby around. We whispered to one another, watched, waited. Dad was breathing heavily, with deep measured breaths, like the Valsalva maneuver he had taught us so many years ago when we visited his cardiology lab—he was still holding on, holding on so desperately hard that it hurt to watch.

Finally, gathering my courage, I moved toward the bed, and laid the baby down on the sheets next to Dad's shoulder, beside his head.

Strangely, at that moment it was as though it was *I* who was being lowered onto a hospital bed to lie beside him. A distant memory returned: Nearly forty years earlier, when my grandfather Samuel lay dying in this very hospital, having been run down by a drunk driver, Dad lifted me—age two or three—onto the white, white bed. I recalled moving through the air and I recalled being set down onto scratchy cotton, close by the roughness of an old man's stubble, his uncombed stiff white hair. A thought came to me: *he has kept himself breathing, alive, waiting for all of us to arrive.* I bent down, I kissed Dad's clammy forehead.

"Hello," he whispered, "Who's there?"

I told him. "With the baby, Jason Samuel, named for your father."

"Oh," he said, in acknowledgment, in pain.

I kissed him again, I whispered goodbye to him. When I straightened up, I nearly passed out.

"You'd better go home," somebody said.

I lifted my baby son away.

We got word from the hospital at nine the next morning. He was gone.

3. Cure

WITHIN ONE MONTH, I became a father, lost a father, nearly went blind. These changes came like the turn of a great wheel, irrevocable as the cycling of day past night. For weeks, squinting as Lisa put drops in my eye, I waited for the world to reappear. In the Fall, a "cryo" procedure froze a similar affected spot in my other eye. I was "cured." According to the eye doctor, my vision should slowly return.

Around a year later, near the end of mourning, Lisa called me at work. I was in my office, supervising a third-year resident. Outside my window, Hasids were gathering in the park. They were descending from yellow schoolbuses, all in black, schoolboys on one side, girls on another, preparing to hold a prayer vigil for the Grand Rebbe—reputedly the Moshaich, the Messiah, come to redeem us all—who was lying, near death, in our hospital.

"Remember," she said, "I thought I heard noises in the attic last night?"

"Ghosts," I said.

"Well, I heard them again this morning," she said. "At first I thought someone was up there, but then I realized it was impossible."

"'Course not! No one could get through those tiny windows!"

"So I opened the trap-door, and two black squirrels came tumbling down on me!" she said. "Then they ran into the family room, and I was chasing them all over with a broom, and they were shitting everywhere!"

I laughed—in itself a relief from the dark crescent that appeared every time I blinked.

"Finally I got them out the door. And I called the trapper, he says you have to go up on the roof with him."

"Who? Daniel Boone?" I said. My third-year resident—who had his own story, victim of the Serbs, exile to America, rebuilding his life by becoming an American psychiatrist—was looking at me rather strangely.

"No, the Suburban Trapper. I called the Humane Society, and they gave me his name. They said the problem isn't squirrels, it's raccoons, they're probably what

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chewed through the roof and let the squirrels in."

"Yeah, sure, I'll go up," I said.

A STRANGE THING about eye surgery, something the ophthalmologist had never explained, was how my world would change afterward. Sure, he told me to expect flashes and floaters, that the shadows might shrink for awhile, and that after six months I wouldn't gain any more sight; yet he didn't prepare me for the strange shift in vision that accompanied those bright diversions. I was forever stubbing my toes, tripping on nonexistent crevices, crashing into tree branches and street signs, brushing against people when I walked down the street, as though my antennae could no longer sense the boundaries of elbows and shoulders, where I ended and the rest of the world began.

A problem of figure and ground, I suppose, which extended from my imbalance when stepping off a curb to an inability when looking at pictures of Dad to actually perceive his face. To characterize it more specifically, I got lost on surfaces: the off-white sky and gray bricks of the New York skyline, the seams and belts of commuters' khaki trenchcoats, the gum-speckled Manhattan pavements, all this distracted me into unaccustomed clumsiness. Even reading was painful, a brawl between characters and margins, which became a major annoyance when I had done the final editing on Dad's autobiography, and whose galleys I read with one eye squeezed shut.

I had a theory, with which my surgeon disagreed, that my retina may have torn one day that past Spring when I dove into the deep end of a swimming pool, wearing goggles, to retrieve a plastic hoop. Since then, not only did the gleam and glitter of water, the refraction and shimmer of displaced shadows, disturb me, but the feeling of immersion in water itself, which I had previously loved, was positively discomfiting.

That afternoon, when I got home, the Suburban Trapper was there. He was a guy about my age, but with dark, slicked-down hair, and a South American accent; his battered red pickup truck was pulled up in our driveway, and he was busily lugging large Hav-a-Heart traps out of his truck and onto the front lawn. The air smelled of peanut butter, huge gobs of which, I realized, he had begun smearing into the traps with a large dirty spoon. A tall, paint-splattered ladder leaned against the front of our house, from the sloping front lawn up to the steep roof.

The Trapper ran agilely up and down the ladder a few times, carrying two traps each trip, and then he said he was ready for me to come up. He started up ahead of me, and the old dried wood swayed and bowed under his weight; halfway up, he turned to beckon me on.

I started up too, pressing my body close against the splintery shafts, ascending over the spindly rhododendrons, through the ruddy penumbra of the Japanese maple, bouncing against the old metal gutters. Above me, standing on what appeared to be a vertical rise of roofing shingles, the Suburban Trapper held the ladder in one hand, a trap in the other. I eased around the other side of the ladder, and stood woozily on the gleaming, sparkling roof. The slant, greater than it looked from below, gave an odd sense of dislocation, as if all the pin oaks and maples around me—indeed, all the houses—stood at an angle. I leaned uphill, following the Trapper to the edge of the attic roof. There he had me twist around, looking down and under.

"See, where they bin eating their ways in?"

I seemed entirely horizontal, bending over in defiance of gravity to see what he was pointing at: under the eaves, where scratches and toothmarks surrounded what appeared to be a dark cave into nowhere.

"They eats through in a few hours!" said the Trapper. "I need to put metal inside to stop them, but meanwhile, we catches any of them in the trap and takes them away."

I was ready to descend, but he motioned for me to follow him, scaling the roof until we stood at the pinnacle, where the soot-stained stucco of the chimney emerged. He tested the wire mesh around the chimney vents, and then we turned around and looked down, out over the suburban scene. I felt like Emerson's transcendentalist sailor, at risk of losing his grip on the mast and tumbling headfirst into the raging waves while contemplating the infinite horizon.

But my view was less extraordinary: a narrow front lawn, waving maple branches, the curve of street behind. Suburbia. Indeed, how entirely ordinary was the world to which I was returning: an ordinary guy living in a nice, ordinary house in the suburbs, with my wife and three kids. Without my father's stories—about being captured by the Russians, mistaken for a Nazi spy, in the last, chaotic days of World War II; about liberating Bergen-Belsen; about the lives he saved daily at the hospital; about his childhood in the coal-mining town of Dillonvale, Ohio...without my father's demanding, cantankerous, illuminating presence, my life —indeed, my entire family's life—was revealed in all its tawdry mundanity.

Something about the Trapper reminded me of Norman Mailer, the dark-complexioned intense young warrior pictured on the back dustjacket of *The Naked and The Dead*, which I had discovered in my father's library at the age of eleven or twelve. It was a shock to a Midwestern kid, reading Mailer. About the scared soldier Hennessey, unnerved by mortar fire, crapping in his pants, then running in panic to embrace needless death. About the erotic curve of life, so similar to the rise and fall of the female breast, similar to all erotic states—a gradual elevation, ascending toward a peak, then a sudden, breathtaking fall. That was when I nearly slid off the roof, that day, thinking how Norman Mailer, age 25, looked so much like my father, the WW II soldier, the battlefield surgeon and hero. No wonder our family's life had been left in a silent, eerie chaos, a state of theorylessness since Dad's death —like Russia without communism— as though we had been robbed not only of a father but of an ideology.

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Luckily the Trapper grabbed me before I fell. "You come down now?" he said.

"Oh, yes, I come down," I said.

I backed cautiously around, and set my feet on the slippery round rungs until they rested on the gleaming grass. My kids were waiting for me. The Trapper clambered down, and stowed the ladder beside his truck.

"Let me show all," the Trapper said, and lifted a tarp on the back of his pickup. There, as grimy as sideshow exhibits, were three gleamy-eyed skunks. "I catched them in New Rochelle," he said. "Now I drives them over next town and lets them go."

"The next town?" I said, overcome by a not entirely unpleasant vision of an infinitely renewable livelihood. Were, perhaps, our raccoons from someone else's attic?

"Oh, no, I drives way, way up into the forest before let they go," he said, as if reading my thoughts.

Two days later, the Trapper removed the half-dozen traps from the attic and the roof, and we were no longer bothered by ghosts in the attic.

4. The Ultraviolet Man

THE WEEK BEGAN, as it usually does these days, with impending catastrophe. In the Monday committee meeting, our Chairman announced the coming reorganization of the Inpatient Services, which are losing almost three million bucks a year.

"We will be closing one unit," he said. "Staff and patients will be redistributed to the two remaining units. We also hope to open a partial hospitalization program, which may employ some of the people cut from 12 North."

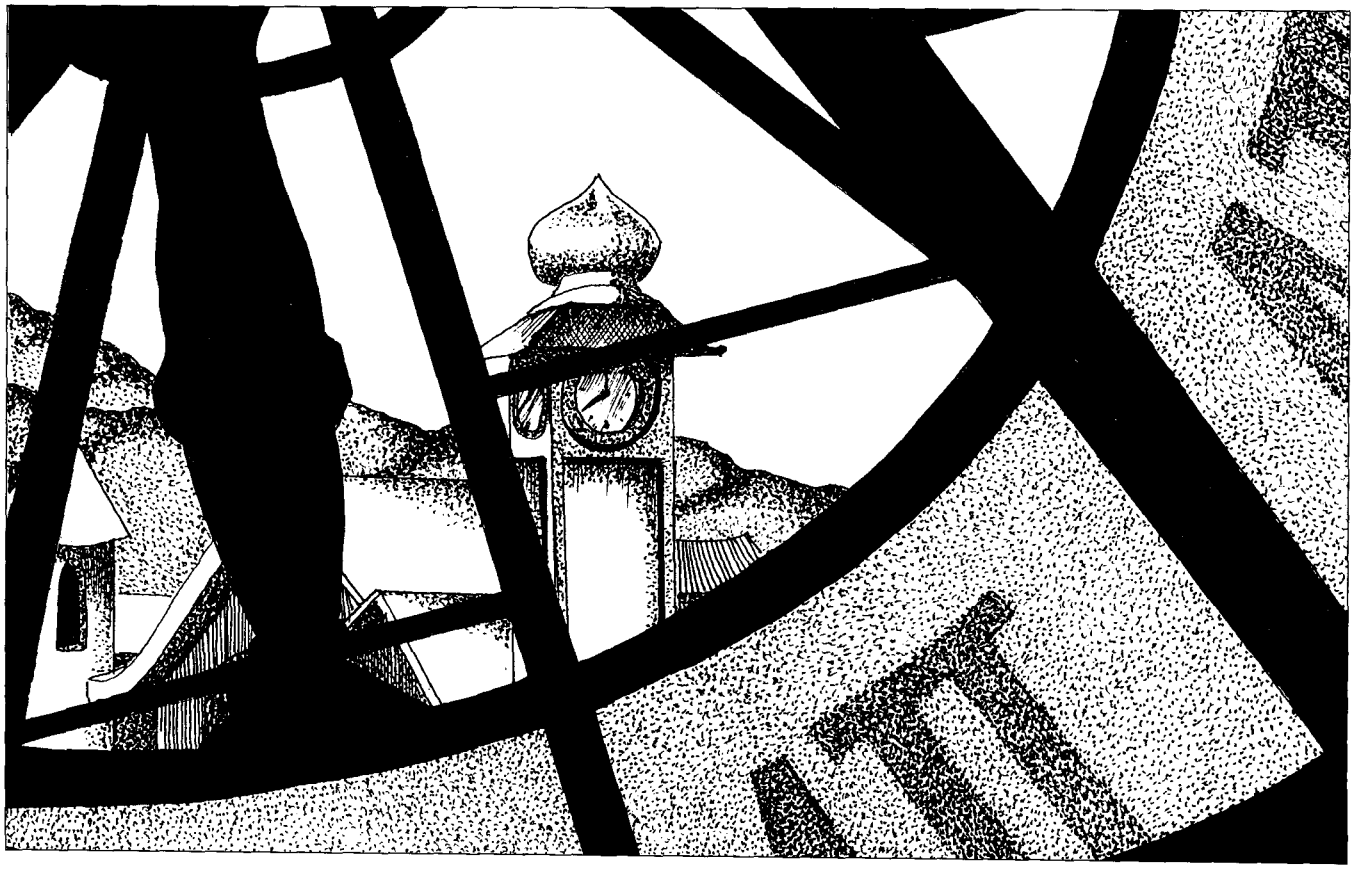
"Is this public information?" asked one doctor.

"Yes," our Chairman said. "Everyone needs to begin to make plans."

We all began looking around the room, assessing which of us might be still working here a year or so from now, and who might be looking for another job. There are too many doctors, too many specialists, that's what all the experts say.

No wonder, I found myself thinking, history has so long been told as a series of lives. The reigns of kings and presidents, the backroom deals of committee leaders. It seemed that with Dad's leaving, an entire world accompanied him. Dad and his buddies came back from World War II, cocky with victory, indifferent to their own wounds, and created their own monuments. Dad's generation of doctors made the whole incredible system of miracles and absurdities that is now in the process of collapse. The enormous expensive American hospitals—where Dad spent his career, where he saved so many lives, and where he died—seem now like vast follies, cathedrals built to ever-retreating deities, which are not completed until all the worshipers are gone.

The holy language of medical science held sway in these cathedrals; now, only a few years after Dad's death, we are invaded by a new, rude jargon. Dad's now-so-distant era allowed doctors to be innocent of markets, indifferent to cash-flow; someone else took care of all that, and the important thing was research. The new words are heartless business words. *Product line management. Benchmarking. Throughput. Reëngineering.* Many hos-



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pitals will close, they say, and we each pray it's not ours.

When I get back to the Clinic, they have just cut down the ultraviolet guy. A Code Team has intubated him; there is a bloody puddle on the Walk-In Waiting Room floor. There are at least four cops standing around, watching other "holds," and nobody seems particularly disturbed.

"What's happening?" I say.

"He's a multiple," says our Walk-In doctor. "It's attempted murder-suicide."

"*What?*"

"One of the personalities—a woman, Teddi—was executing the others, and taking herself along with them."

I go into the room: there, just below the ceiling, on a sturdy metal bracket, is the light box, mandated by the State to protect all of us against tuberculosis. A long cord emerges from the top of the box, and apparently had been plugged into a socket a few inches away.

"He stood on the couch and pulled the cord down and wrapped it around his neck," says the Walk-In doc. "A guard came by and saw him, hanging, and he and I lifted up while the clerk untied the cord."

We watch as he is lifted onto a stretcher—a twentyish, red-headed man in a black sweatshirt and jeans—and as he is wheeled away to the Emergency Room.

The floor is scattered with IV tubing, plastic wraps, needle cases, chux, a puddle of drying blood.

When I get done from the multiple, my Croatian resident is waiting for me: he has an urgent case to discuss, a man who is being evicted from his apartment. A building manager, whose apartment came along with the job. A new management company is coming in, and consolidating the management of several buildings under one manager, and hence no longer needs him; as a result, he, his stroke-crippled wife and their two kids will have nowhere to go. His plan: to attack with a baseball bat the manager who is evicting them, and end up in jail; his wife will sleep in the car, the son will go to a state hospital, the daughter will sleep on some friend's couch. A New York story, a New York solution. I listen to my resident's presentation, suggest a family meeting.

"This family, it cannot be mobilized," he said.

"Maybe they could find something through the Church."

"No," he says, "they do not believe."

5. The Inner Skin

HEALTH, SAID CELINE, is the silence of organs; conversely, one might posit disease to be cacophony. The wild cells that improvise new shapes, that jazz with our genetic codes, form "tumors"—that is, masses or bulges or protruberances, sometimes benign, other times malignant. The news from the Human Genome project is that we're halfway there; only forty or fifty thousand more genes to be sequenced and we will know the human code. In the final months of pregnancy, the final months of Dad's life, my wife's round body was infinitely erotic; we made love often that Spring, feeling the baby's movements echo our own, engulfed in the swollen roundnesses of desire. For the first time I felt the primal pull of the fertility goddess, and knew why ancient man found sacred desire in the rotund finality of pregnancy.

In the months of recovery, unable to write, I took solace in the early divisions of cells, which shape themselves in hollow globes, in spheres as they divide, with miraculously defined edges, so that one cell belongs to ectoderm, the next to endoderm, keeping their identity forever.

In my own family, in my own life, the cacophony is only beginning to die down; we are returning, after three years, to a new, extraordinary silence.

What brought me back, I think, was the realization that Mailer had it wrong. The breast is not the ultimate metaphor; the uterus is. The most astounding class in medical school was embryology, in which we learned how the single cell of the embryo divides and divides, forming a hollow sphere, which then "invaginates" at one end to form the beginning of the "neural tube." We learned how every further development of life is a variation upon that moment—division, enfolding, division, enfolding, as boundaries form between different types of cells, until an entire creature is formed by a complex wrapping of spheres and tubes. The hollow globe, like the biosphere itself, is replicated and recapitulated a million times in our bodies; the brain itself is a beautifully wrinkled, folded sphere. Even pain, whether that of blindness or cancer or childbirth, is from disturbance of the sphere, from stretching or bulging of the globe. That is what I thought about, I guess, in listening to my wife's *hee hee hee* in the car while driving down the FDR, terrified that we'd get stuck in traffic, or when Dad was suffering in those final days, or when I was trying to see again, to make the globe stop bulging. And so, I concluded, Mailer is wrong: life is not a simple curve that begins and ends; it is a sphere that invaginates, a hollow-centered globe that creates its own new globes within. There is something reassuring even in realizing how for new cells to grow into their proper shapes, other obsolete cells must die back, in what is called "programmed cell death."

INTERESTINGLY, in recent months I hardly notice my dark planet, my moon of sightlessness. My brain has reconfigured to navigate effortlessly around it. The globe is actually round again, and only with a struggle can I perceive my eclipse. More astoundingly, I can look at my father's photograph and see him again—on the pass-through over our kitchen sink, there is a photo, taken perhaps a year before his death, of Dad and Mom at a cardiology conference in Venezuela.

These days, I glance at Dad each time I get a glass of water. The strange thing now is that in looking at him I discover that I am seeing myself—a reflection, a doubling, another I that looks calmly back at me. □

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Tradition

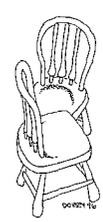
ROBERT L. KING

THE TITLE CHARACTER of David Hare's latest play, *Amy's View*, is the daughter of Esme Allen, a woman whose successful acting career has peaked when the London theater no longer offers actresses continuing, fulfilling work. Dominic is Amy's lover in Act I (1979), husband in II (1985), betrayer in III (1993), and widower in IV (1995). He is a product and purveyor of popular culture, and by the play's end he has directed a very successful, very violent film. In death, Amy remains a barrier between Dominic and Esme, neither of whom saw worth in the other's work and could not subscribe to Amy's view that loving people without question is the fundamental human value.

Over the play's sixteen years, Dominic's career flourishes as Esme's declines. In off-stage action, he takes a younger woman as a mistress, "a brainless Heidi" to Amy, who is nonetheless willing to stay with her husband and children. Esme, who hates television in Act I, takes a part in an escapist series in III. Amy comes home for a visit in I and leaves her mother for good in III despite Esme's pleading: "I beg you, Amy, please stay." But Amy's final view is harsh: "I went with Dominic because he was the future. I'm frightened of you because you're the past." These reversals and contrasts appear obvious only when reflection lifts them from Hare's dramatic contexts. In the theater, most of the play's sharp confrontations are governed and informed by Esme as performer, a woman so committed to her profession that role playing has become a social strategy and personal value for her. Even her original wit seems distilled from the repartee of the many characters she has played; it often has the satiric bite that wins the moment and caps it with laughter. Although that wit prompts the most sympathetic response from the audience and although Esme is the play's central character, her dominant theatrical presence confers no secure moral authority.

After Esme appears as a celebrity to cut the ribbon opening a suburban fete, she makes fun of her role and the event itself. Hare gives Dominic, champion of vulgar taste, the telling put-down: "You want it both ways. Both to do it and mock it." In Act III, when Esme delivers a long speech to deflect Amy's valid criticism, her daughter is even more incisive now that she has been tested by hard experience:

> What, I'm meant to be charmed? Is that it? Is this some performance? My mother putting on this brave and gutsy display. Well, forget it! I'm not charmed by it.



Here and throughout the play, Hare folds one irony in another, for Esme herself has articulated the acting standards she upholds, and they become the test for her human sincerity. Shortly after meeting him, she half boasts to Dominic: "Layers. I play lots of layers." In a later dialogue with Amy she identifies the "basic skill" of her profession: "You say one thing, but you're thinking another." Moments later, she adds that the double point of view of acting "can't be achieved. But that's the ideal. To make it look effortless. Perhaps it applies just as much in our lives."

Years later, when she offends Dominic, Esme refuses to mend the breach by acting civil: "I'm meant to pretend that I've done something wrong?" She criticizes Dominic for not showing "people in the grip of real passions" in his work, but her own life is lived too exclusively as a performance which masks her own deep feelings. When she does plead for comfort from Amy, she has been taken to the edge of poverty by ill-advised investments in a Lloyd's of London syndicate. Amy resists her embrace and "*the two women seem to be fighting*," a painfully ambiguous dramatic image as acted by Judi Dench and Samantha Bond. This, Esme's most vulnerable, most soul-baring performance, fails to persuade Amy to stay the night.

The last act, the shortest, is set in Esme's dressing room backstage in a small theater. Her face is covered with cold cream, and soon she will remove that mask to replace it with her stage face. Dominic enters tentatively, the two have been estranged. He is a financial success, but the checks he has sent unasked to Esme have not been cashed, partly because she resents help from him and also because any money beyond providing genteel subsistence goes by law to her Lloyd's liability. Hostile to each other's work for sixteen years, he has seen her play, and she his film. While Dominic "liked the play's youth," she was "appalled" by the violence that he defends by calling it "action." As Esme condemns the film, her anger and grief rise in a speech which masterfully asserts the characteristic Hare commitment to enduring moral realities in a world which scorns them:

> Is it that you just don't dare to deal with real experience . . . with the things that really go on in real life? Like grief . . . and betrayal . . . and love and unhappiness. . . and loss . . . the loss of people we love . . .

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The stage direction now puts Esme "*disturbingly out of control*," but her style for all its fitful surface carries meanings that only firm control can achieve. Hare links "love" and "loss" by a slight alliteration, and "love," the great abstract value here, is transformed from noun to verb. It becomes an action, one contingent in syntax and in "real" life on the "people" it modifies.

In the same scene, Esme comes close to confessing her fault when she admits to Dominic that his arrival meant that her "daughter was lost to her." They share a smile at his ironic reply ("To be fair, you did dislike me personally, too") and, after a moment of "*some real warmth between them*," Dominic leaves. Esme opens his gift, a box with thousands of pounds in cash. Her fellow actor, Toby, joins her as a single bright light like an approaching train's shines out into the audience. Billowing curtains fall away. The two performers, their backs toward the house, are facing an imagined audience. Toby douses her with water—a kind of secular baptism—for the opening scene of her play. Her last words and Hare's are "Now we're alone," a paradoxical truth for a woman who has minutes before told Dominic: "My life is when the curtain goes up. My work is my life. I understand nothing else." *Amy's View* is wide and deep in its understanding of the social pressures we find, create, resist, and obey.

Both David Hare and Judi Dench have made much of their lives' work at the National Theatre, and their audiences know as much. Eleven of his plays have been produced there, and within the last few years Dame Judi Dench has acted actors on its stages: Desirée in *A Little Night Music* and Arkadina in *The Seagull*. No commentary can suggest the layers she adds to lines about layers or to scenes in which acting as a value is held up for examination. Personal authority, professional achievement, and artistic integrity merge in her acting and his drama.

MARTIN MCDONAGH'S *The Cripple of Inishmaan* played in repertory with *Amy's View* at the National, and it has been announced for the spring at New York's Public Theatre.

McDonagh has also had a trilogy staged in London, one of which is headed for Off-Broadway. He was twenty-five when *The Cripple of Inishmaan* was accepted for production, and he told Richard Eyre, Director of the National, that he didn't have much experience as a theatergoer, a claim that his sure dramatic control belies.

The play is set on the middle one of the three Aran Islands in 1934, the year when Robert Flaherty filmed *Man of Aran*. Billy Claven, the title character, hears of the filming from Inishmaan's self-important gossip and wangles a boat ride to the largest island, Inishmore, in hopes of finding escape to Hollywood. He tells Helen, a girl with delightfully coarse wit, that he wants "to be in the filming," and she reacts first with an incredulous "You?" and then adds, "I shouldn't laugh at you, Billy . . . but I will." While our society avoids words like "cripple" and certainly discourages laughter at the aspirations of the infirm, McDonagh, like Synge, sees in the stark Aran world an absurdist awareness of our frailties and a healthy need to laugh at them.

Helen justifies a hurtful prank to her brother, Bartley: "It wouldn't be a very Christian thing to do, no, but it'd be awful funny." And he, admonished by Billy for laughing at "other people's misfortunes," similarly defends himself: "But it's awful funny." The comic dialogue is buttressed by an often uncompromising respect for the tough realities, an attitude that life on a barren island must enforce. Cripple Billy, who needs release more than the others and briefly escapes, asks that the gossip call him by another name. The response is a question, tossing common sense logic back upon him: "Isn't your name Billy, and aren't you a cripple?" Later, Billy wants to believe the best of the parents who abandoned him as a baby: "I've heard me mammy was a beautiful woman."

> DOCTOR: No, no, she was awful ugly . . . she'd scare a pig.

Billy reaches for another consoling story—that he is crippled because his father punched his mother while she was pregnant. Again the doctor corrects him with a lesson that speaks for McDonagh and, behind him, the Synge whose *Playboy of the Western World* caused rioting: "Disease caused you to turn out the way you did . . . Don't go romanticizing it."

Speaking of American Irish, a Dublin journalist once told me, "They're the worst." He was referring to IRA supporters in New York whose simplistic version of history ignores present political complexities. Their romanticized Ireland, as Billy learned, is the nostalgic stuff of trite movies:

> To tell you the truth, Bartley, it wasn't an awful big thing at all to turn down Hollywood, with the arse-faced lines they had me reading for them. "Can I not hear the wail of the banshees for me, as far as I am from me barren island home. An Irishman I am, begora! With a heart and a spirit on me not crushed by a hundred years of oppression."

It's all, he concludes, "a rake of shite."

The one constant is pain, insisted on dramatically by Helen's punching and poking her brother and Billy. She breaks three raw eggs over Bartley's head as they play England versus Ireland, and she threatens to egg *The Man of Aran* because it left her, The Lass of Aran, out. She pokes at Billy's wound, inflicted with savage violence by the man to whom he lied as a way of getting off the island. At the end, Helen gives him his first kiss and agrees to go walking or "shuffling" with him. She leaves and, his head bandaged, Billy raises blood with his tubercular cough, a disease indeed. The stage is empty and then dark, like his life. As tough-minded as it is, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* displays a world so enclosed that it raises distancing laughter more often than painful recognition. More important, it raises well-

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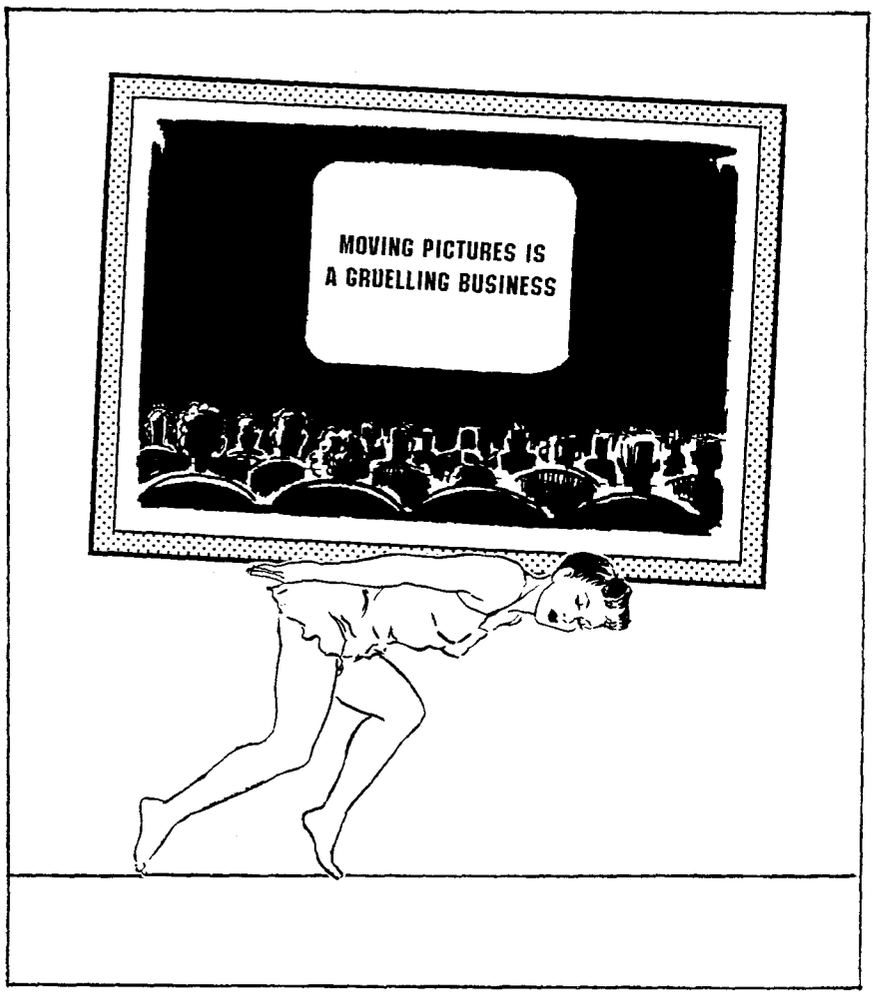
founded hopes for other work from its young, greatly talented author.

Situated in living traditions, neither *Amy's View* nor *The Cripple of Inishmaan* betrays any deadening anxiety of influence. Perhaps the very presence of great works—quite literally in the neighborhood—helps to liberate the playwright to create something fresh without needing to acknowledge debts to artists past.

IN THE SMALLEST of the National's houses, a large flat crashed to the floor in *King Lear*'s storm scene. This collapse of theatrical artifice anticipated Ian Holm's stripping off the "lendings" of his costume to stand literally naked before the imaginary storm. His last "howl" was like a coyote's, and he choked on the final "never." Much as dramatic trappings fell away, Holm's Lear grew into knowledge through his self-inflicted pain. With an exceptionally strong cast, this *Lear* created greatness in a small space much as the all-too-human King himself does. In repertory with the absolute metaphysics of *Lear* was *Closer*, a new play by Patrick Marber, whose *Dealer's Choice* was far more nuanced about people caught in relationships. *Closer*, his second play and one of the tightest tickets in London, substituted obscenity for honesty and relentlessness for dramatic intensity. All this was pegged to a gimmick justified more by a program quotation from Conrad's *Chance* than by a hard-headed attitude toward the world.

One bus stop from the National Theatre, a new company formed by Peter Hall is dedicated to presenting classic plays in repertory with new ones. So, with memories of a *Lear* still vivid, one could see a revival of *Waiting for Godot*, the radical examination of meaning in theater and beyond that in life stripped of its philosophical "lendings." Alan Howard's slight brogue recalled Beckett's Irish roots; as Vladimir, he questioned his ideas with a puzzled look before he tried to articulate them. Ben Kingsley's Estragon, in contrast, frequently seemed puzzled by his own words after he spoke them. Meaning, insofar as it exists, lived somewhere in a space between uncertainties. Their dialogue, as a result, continually anticipated Beckett's final stasis: the "*They do not move*" after Estragon's "Let's go." When he directed the English language premiere of *Godot*, Hall had the insight to cast the two as tramps, a choice so right that it has since seemed Beckett's own. Forty-two years later, his Didi and Gogo, while stressing the comic, make it rise from an elusive reality that is finally bleak.



M. KASPER

Directors of two other plays at the Old Vic approached their texts with less confidence in language. With actors of stature, Felicity Kendal and Michael Pennington among them, both *The Provok'd Wife* and *The Seagull* came across as one-note plays. The lines of the Restoration comedy were recited or delivered, rather than acted; no character displayed arch self-awareness as a stylist, the manner that distinguishes such plays and lets the audience see meaning develop rather than simply be resolved by a witty thrust.

In *The Seagull*, Arkadina threw food at her brother when she protested that she had no money. She capped her flattery of Trigorin with a "Got him" out to the house. More successful were several speeches directed at the audience as appeals for understanding, although they tended to undercut the self-conscious role-playing that gives *The Seagull* much of its incisive power.

LESS THAN A MILE DOWN the Thames from the National's complex of theaters stands the faithful reconstruction of Shakespears's Globe. As a living theater, the building is already a great success, a thrilling thing to enter. My only fear is that in trying to achieve a legitimate popularity, the Globe may become a trendy tourist stop. Advance publicity and some elements of staging have encouraged unconventional audience reactions, and while some of them provoke valuable participation, others, like loud comments from the Pit, can be no more than self-indulgent. In Act

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(signature) Robley Wilson, Editor

V of *Henry V* when the King kissed Katherine, a voice cut the relative quiet: "Kiss her again, she liked it." At another performance, a spectator was reported to shout at the Governor of Harfleur, who was on the upper stage, "Jump, you frog." Hissing and booing the French got tiresome and distracting; playing to the audience was overdone.

Other potential problems didn't arise during the *Henry V* I attended. No jet noise, city sounds or bad weather intruded, and actors' voices were no more lost in the open space than they would have been in a large, enclosed theater. *Henry V*, with its famous prologue inviting imaginative expansion of the Globe's "wooden O," was certainly an appropriate choice for the first play. Its blocking was often both lively and instructive. To honor the formality of a set speech, Henry spoke out to the audience even as a nod or gesture recognized his audience in the play itself. However, Mark Rylance was neither New-Historicist crafty nor old-school heroic as Henry. In the all-male cast, Toby Cockerell had a chance to stand out as Katherine, and he did. The cannon, drums, pounding staves, fanfares and highly detailed costumes focused attention on a realistic foreground and thereby supplied a ground for audience participation on the high level of creative play. We had every reason to fill out the "cockpit" with our imaginings.

The Royal Shakespeare Company no longer has a summer season in London, so we returned to Stratford for the first time in several years to see *Hamlet* in repertory with its revenge play antecedent, *The Spanish Tragedy*. It proved to be a *Hamlet* without the other prince—no Fortinbras, no opening scene on the battlements. The new first scene was staged as a wedding reception for Claudius and Gertrude; the ghost of Hamlet's father appeared there in a black tie and was seen only by his son, a fresh touch achieved at a high price. After the duel with Laertes, Hamlet produced a gun and shot Claudius's poisoned body three times. He had pointed the gun at the audience at "To be or not to be." The Gravedigger sang "September Song"; Gertrude sat on her bed between old and young Hamlets. The question of how far a director can depart from received ideas about Shakespeare may never be satisfactorily answered, but cutting two of Hamlet's soliloquies must cross some line.

After the interval, Hamlet appeared in a top hat, scarlet coat and a loose black tie over a collarless shirt. He looked like a circus ringmaster as he prepared to oversee the play-within-a-play. It was acted out behind a white sheet with the player King appearing in silhouette in a hat shaped like Hamlet's. Hamlet went behind the screen when the play was given over. More than any other scene, this one put inventiveness in service to a more general point about theatrical representation.

Modern stagecraft was put to effective use when the very first words of *The Spanish Tragedy* were prompted by an amplified off-stage voice. Andrea's ghost worked through his long speech, had to repeat some phrases and was dependent on Revenge for many of his lines. Heironimo's words when he reveals his son's body in Act IV were projected on a curtain at the opening, and both techniques created a return at the conclusion. Revenge came to a full, fruitless circle in a very satisfying production. *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet* and *The Seagull* all present plays within the play; in *Amy's View*, Esme's very life is an act within an act. Of his Old Vic version of the third one, Tom Stoppard, author of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, admits, "I have very occasionally fallen to the temptation of spot-the-Shakespeare . . . in the spirit of piety [to Chekhov]" and, I think, as a way of showing Arkadina's superficiality. Esme's comments on acting recall Hamlet's charge to the players. Her facing us through an absent dressing room mirror derives from Pirandello and can be compared specifically to a similar scene in *M. Butterfly*. In Hare, McDonagh, Stoppard and others, the tradition lives, not as daunting or negative but as resourceful and liberating. □

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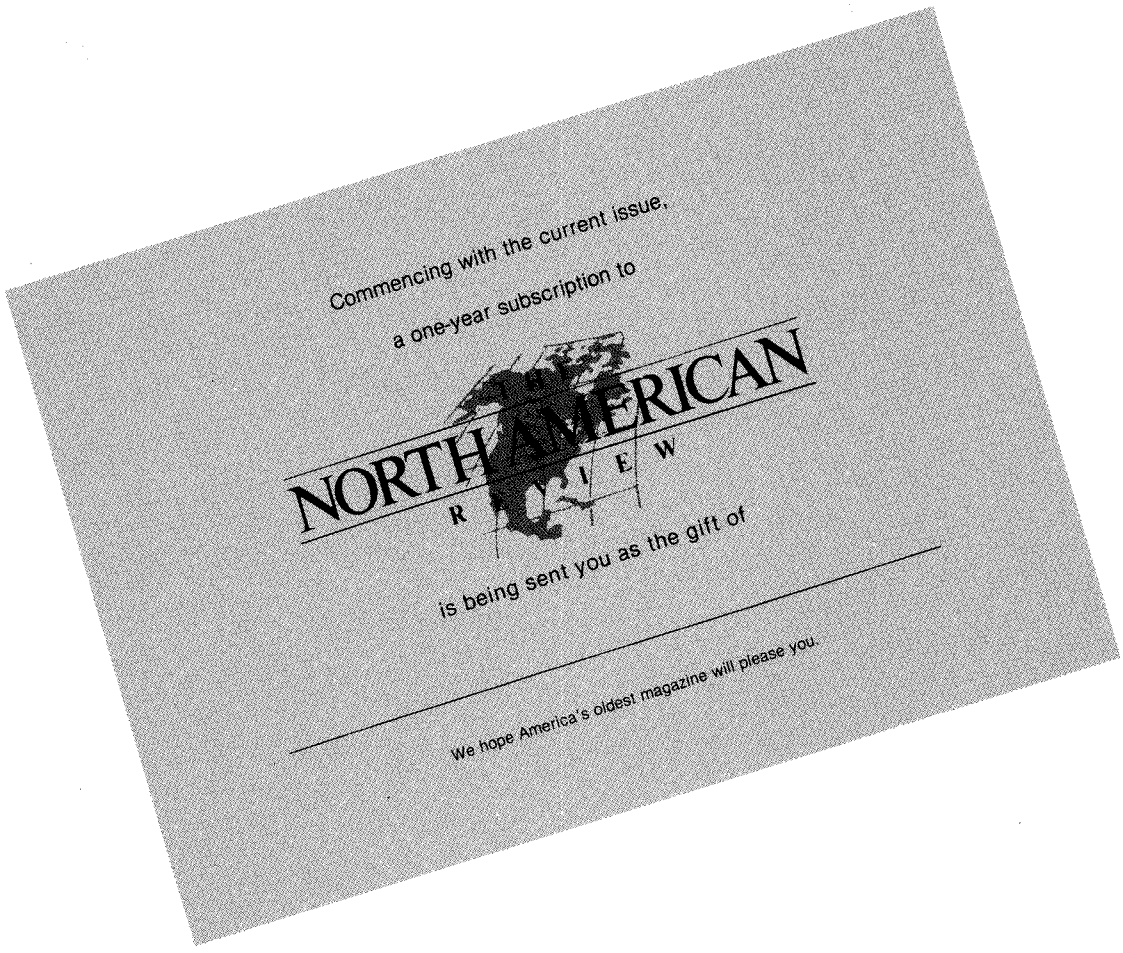
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